

Gone with the Wynd

by

Kracken

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Gone with the Wynd

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Included is an excerpt from book two.

Chapter One

From the old oak pulpit of the New Hope Church, the Reverend Peter Strike 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 wasn't in the bible or the handbook of what constituted good sportsmanship. They were supposed to set a good example for the children.

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 townfolk. Serving a community of farmers, Peter 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, pumped full of adrenaline from a back breaking day of work, had not been a good combination.

As punishment, Peter 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. Unfortunately, the person who had landed a punch on Kirk Runion, the volunteer umpire who was big enough to be mistaken for a well fed steer, wasn't there to suffer along with them. He had been taken to the emergency room the night before. Poor Runion, sporting a black eye, sat in the second pew, scowling at the clock on the wall. The plain round dial read 10:30 a.m. The sermon usually ran until 11:00 a.m. The Reverend wished he could exempt Kirk and allow him to go to his Sunday brunch early. For that matter, he wished he could exempt himself.

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. Peter found himself staring at them instead of the bible before him. He knew the sermon 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 they were all in a level of hell tailor made for their sins, especially his. 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 sprinklings 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. He found it 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. 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 for allowing his attention to drift. He wasn't the fire and brimstone preacher his father had been. He could not conjure up with words appropriate descriptions of Hell to gain 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 to write speeding tickets.

Peter had a soft voice lacking in the bass 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 hampered his delivery as well. Old Mrs. Hargrove, for example, a ninety year old who headed a quilting bee and still did charity work, 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 eternal hellfire might await her in the afterlife.

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 in their seats, 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 the latecomer. The words died in his throat.

A young man had taken a seat at the back of the church. Peter surmised he had chosen his seat in the very last pew because he wasn't sure of his welcome. Peter could understand why. He 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, called the Dao, 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 Dao won every case. They were either well connected or had deep pockets to pay off State officials.

The man had long blonde hair that had been kissed by the sun, making it as pale as golden light on new snow. The color reminded Peter of his misspent youth on California beaches watching a myriad of pumped up surfers with dye jobs walk the warm sands. His big blue eyes, lightly tanned skin, and handsome, Nordic features, though, convinced Peter that his hair color wasn't the product of a good colorist. He wore a loose, tan tunic shirt, a pair of yoga pants the color of his eyes and sandals that were totally impractical for the rocky countryside or the treacherous ground among the pine forests in the park.

The forest that surrounded them was notorious for its steep ravines and caves obscured by undergrowth, both deadly to careless hikers. Peter could imagine them filled with Dao participants from previous years; piles of bones in colorful gypsy or second hand clothing. It was a morbid image he found

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 Dao 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 Peter think of a disapproving Catholic nun. It was Peter's cue 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, my God, when I in awesome wonder
Consider all the worlds Thy Hands have made
I see the stars, I hear the rolling thunder
Thy power throughout the universe displayed*

Petula had been his father's dedicated assistant longer than Peter had 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 gray 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.

Peter loved blondes as much as his father had. He couldn't concentrate on his singing congregation, or his own singing for that matter, as his eyes sought out the Boho man at the back of the church. He tried to convince himself he was practicing priestly concern, but he knew he was lying to himself. He was imagining spreading that man's legs, sinking his cock into his tight warmth, and relieving a month's worth of pent up sexual repression. He could almost feel the man's lovely moist mouth sucking on his large, dark cock, and imagined coming hard down his throat.

The man's seat was empty.

Peter's eyes swept the church in consternation and his singing faltered. Every corner of the small church was bathed in light and there wasn't enough room under the pews for a full grown man to hide. He was certain he would have heard the doors grate against the jam if he had exited, yet clearly he wasn't in the church.

Through a window Peter saw a flicker of movement. At first he thought it might be 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 Boho man walking up a hill covered in wild flowers and tall grass and crowned by a thick stand of lodge pole pine trees. His loose tunic caught a small breeze and rippled along with his white-blond hair. He seemed an image out of a fine painting; nature, beauty, and rarified sunlight. Mesmerized, Peter's eyes followed him until he disappeared among the trees.

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 wasn't 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 I felt ashamed to sing with you. I asked 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."

Caught off guard, it took Petula several seconds to turn back to her piano and begin playing. 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 seethed with outrage at Peter's subterfuge. Peter 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 of them because of his stupidity. He wasn't going to allow a New Age-Bohemian man distract him again.

Chapter Two

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

The dog looked like a husky mix. Its white fur had 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 Peter’s previous night’s rib dinner had offered little in the way of scraps. It had been good and Peter 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. It clearly distrusted humans. Peter decided that it wasn’t a farm dog looking for an extra meal. He was sure it had been on its own for a while. Most likely someone had dumped it along the nearby highway. He, 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 white washed wood frame house reserved for the Pastor, Peter hunted through the refrigerator for better scraps. He dumped leftover chicken and potted meat that had expired dates onto a paper plate. He added half of a dried out and unappetizing ham sandwich that had been lost on a back rack behind the condiments. He filled a plastic bowl with water and then took the paper plate and bowl back to the garbage can. The dog wasn’t there.

Peter whistled hopefully.

His eyes 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 watched.

Peter finally placed the bowl and the plate on the ground and left them

there. He felt foolish knowing the food would probably be eaten by ants or a lucky raccoon. The boy in him that had always wanted a dog, though, couldn't help making the attempt. It ignored Peter's sound, adult arguments why a dog would be a bad idea as it searched for a name. Freckles— Cinnamon— Bandit— Silver— Blue... Blue was a good name.

Men like him had to be prepared to move at a moment's notice. Peter 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 tried 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 the new Reverend, he now turned his attention to the outside. He had repainted the old buildings, taken out an oak tree that had died in a drought year, and fought to bring order to chaos in the plant world within an acre of the church.

Peter wondered why his efforts hadn't won over Petula, but the most she gave him was a *stink eye* and a dubious sniff. She acted as if he were 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, his upkeep, and charity work, Peter might have dismissed her. He needed her like he needed his right hand, though, and certainly 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 rolled in it. After a few moments of intense action the

weeds stilled and the dog stood up. Full of burs now, he shook himself and then trotted away without looking at Peter.

“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 being enjoyed by ants.

“Loco.” He now said it 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 sun browned larkspur struggling to survive in the heat. Feeling that his act of charity had at least found someone in need, he turned to take the bowl back into the house.

“Have you seen my friend Jeffie?”

Peter started badly and fumbled the bowl. He juggled it in his hands until he had a firm grasp on it. Keeping it between him and his surprise visitor as if it could double as a weapon, he confronted his attacker. He felt acute embarrassment when he finally focused on the diminutive man standing before him.

“Blonde man with blue eyes,” he said, in a tone that reminded Peter of hardboiled detectives in old sitcoms. “He’s young, like me.”

And that would be their only similarity, Peter thought. He had a very unique appearance. He couldn’t have weighed more than 120 pounds. He had a pixie like face topped with a wild tangle of red dread locks adorned with beaded white feathers, gold gypsy pendants, and bound with colorful, overlapping bandanas. He 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 Peter’s wary expression. His tiny body, clothed in psychedelic colored tights, overlarge hiking boots, and a

beaded swim suit bikini top, looked overwhelmed by his jewelry. Dozens of heavy silver bracelets, necklaces, and large earrings were adorned by chunky red and blue stones and crystals. Their design had a definite Tibetan influence.

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

The young man’s lips pursed. They were full lips. Movie stars paid thousands of dollars for lips like those. Peter felt certain his were natural. They were the kind of lips that gave great head.

The man looked over his sunglasses at Peter. His eyes were as green as new leaves and framed by dark lashes. Peter might have thought of bonnie lads in the Scottish Highlands wearing kilts a man could lift before fucking their reputedly bare asses, if it weren’t for a certain ethnic flair to the smile the young man gave him and the texture of the strands of his hair escaping his dreads.

“You’re a priest?”

“Reverend Strike.”

His smile dropped as his index finger pushed his sunglasses back into place. He managed to look incredulous even behind his mask of mirrored lenses. “Jeffie doesn’t like churches. Why would he go into yours?”

“Maybe to get out of the heat?”

He mulled that over as he looked past Peter. Peter thought about what he was seeing. A hoe, a shovel, turned over, rocky earth. Normal people would have concluded that Peter had been gardening. Peter knew the exact moment when the man began to suspect that Peter had buried the body of Jeffie in the defunct flower beds. Peter’s lustful thoughts vanished.

“I’m going to plant petunias.”

“They’ll die.” The man’s voice sounded a little weak, as if he couldn’t help his nature and had to correct Peter’s horticultural blunder despite his fear.

“What do you suggest?” Peter kept his voice calm and tried not to take

offense as he took a step backward.

“Some salvia would be good, or monardella and lavender flowers.”

“Two purples?” Peter surprised him 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 the man's suspicions that he was a serial killer.

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

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

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

Acrobats? A lewd un-priest like image formed in Peter's mind that included Wynd nude on a trapeze, with his lovely legs spread, and a tangle of airborne, very limber acrobats making hot love to him in midair. Peter dismissed the image quickly, but he knew he was blushing and aroused. He saw Wynd clench his jaw and Peter wondered if he had guessed Peter's thoughts.

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

The man hesitated and then gave Peter a fake one. “He knows me by Wynd. It's spelled with a y.”

An unusual name for an unusual person, but it fit him. It made Peter's thoughts turn to sunny beaches, surf, and ocean breezes. Wynd wasn't the name of someone who lived in forests and hung from trapezes with acrobats, naked or otherwise, in a group named after Chinese Daoism. Dao: to be in harmony with the infinite universe. Peter was sure that belief system didn't include rampant hedonism.

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

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

They passed Peter’s turned over flower beds, 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 vowed 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 it determined that they didn’t have food, and then drifted off to the East. Heedless of his brief escort, Wynd walked quickly. His boots made crunching sounds on the gravel and his red dreads, pendants, scarves, and feathers bounced on his back with each step he took. Peter’s tennis shoes were quieter, but not soundless. He had to be aware that Peter was following him.

Peter wasn’t prone to casual hookups with men. The moment had to be right, the moon a certain shade of blue, his personality just so, and there had to be no chance he 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 he intended to stay on the right side of the law going forward.

His friends in his old life would have died laughing, seeing him chasing after a wild looking man who didn't want any part of him. They would have recognized the old him in his actions. Peter was appalled at the risk he was taking. Wynd already suspected he had done something to Jeffie. His actions were only confirming his fears.

"It's a long way to town," Peter said loudly, wanting Wynd to know his motives were pure, even though he was imagining Wynd's little pert ass riding his big, dark cock and desperately wanted it to become a reality. "Hitchhiking is dangerous. Most of the traffic isn't local."

"Are you suggesting an alternative?"

Wynd hadn't turned or slowed his steps. Peter was forced to talk to his 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 they 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?" He didn't seem outraged at the thought of Peter being gay. It confirmed Peter's vibe that Wynd was gay as well.

"More like an offer from a concerned citizen."

Wynd eyed him over his shoulder and then began looking for a likely ride. Several cars sped by. A red truck, covered in dried mud, didn't meet his unspoken standard either.

"Concerned citizen? Not Pastor?"

It has been one of those slips of the tongue Peter 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. Wynd surprised him by laughing and turning to look at him fully. His smile had dimples.

“You don’t date much do you?”

“No,” Peter admitted.

“Keep practicing.”

Peter opened his mouth to reply, but Wynd stopped him.

“On someone else.”

“I’m sorry.”

Wynd 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, normal man... What’s your first name?”

“Peter.”

Wynd frowned. Still looking at traffic, he said, “You don’t look like a Peter. More like a.... Hunter.”

Hearing his real name shocked him. Peter’s heart skipped a beat and he broke out in a cold sweat, wondering if Wynd knew him from his other life. He calmed himself down with difficulty in the next moment as reason reasserted itself and he realized Wynd was making fun of his bad attempt to hunt him. Peter wanted to deny it. He felt confused, drawn to Wynd, but certainly not interested in complicating his stolen new life with a boyfriend. If he wanted sexual relief, he drove fifty miles away from town to a biker bar, where a nice looking, older man named Duke, was more than willing to let a younger man pound his ass into the mattress without any complications. Even though his curly blonde hair was getting peppered with gray, he had a body that looked good wearing a tank top and black leather pants. Peter didn’t think Duke bought his story about his being a traveling salesman, but he never questioned Peter about it and he always had a smile for him and a shouted *How the hell ya’ been?*

“I move around a lot,” Wynd said as he stepped forward and began waving

down an approaching semi. Peter heard the sound of brakes and it began to slow. "You're cute," Wynd continued, "but I'm going to be gone next week. I could totally damage your reputation by then."

His words made it sound as if he was interested in Peter, but that he was sacrificing any good time to be had for Peter's sake. Like Peter, he wasn't opposed to sexual encounters with no complications. That might have turned some men off, but Peter felt strangely disgusted with himself, not Wynd. Peter felt more critical of his friends with benefits arrangement with Duke, as if that made him not good enough for Wynd. It was a definite double standard he imposed on himself and he wasn't sure why. Perhaps he wanted to be who Wynd imagined him to be, an honest, upstanding man of the cloth. Even though he 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 Wynd 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 Wynd. The spit hit the gravel in a brown splatter. A yellow butterfly fluttered over to it to investigate. "What's up, boy?" the man asked in a heavy Carolina accent.

"I need a ride into town." Wynd smiled brightly up at him. He was a slight, defenseless looking Boho hippy that had the sun in his red hair, white gravel dirt on his shoes, and an air about him that made Peter 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," Wynd 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 he had poor eyesight. “What about him?” He made that question sound like a warning. If Peter was coming, his tone said, it was a deal breaker.

Wynd made a dismissive gesture with his hand. “He’s staying.”

“All right, then. Hop on board.”

Wynd looked back at Peter and his smile changed. It was serious and friendly, not fake like the one he had given the driver. He asked, “If you see Jeffie, please tell him to go back to the Dao or call me.”

“I will.” Peter assured him. He wasn’t happy about letting Wynd go and couldn’t help expressing his frustration. “I don’t think this is a good idea.”

“Life is all about taking chances, but thanks for caring.” Wynd didn’t let Peter see his eyes. The mirrored lenses of his sunglasses were a wall, repelling Peter and preventing him from arguing further. Wynd 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 he had discarded the idea that Peter was a serial killer. Peter could almost feel happy about that, until he saw the driver lift up a can of beer and take a swig. He finished it off as Wynd opened the passenger side of the van and climbed in. As Wynd 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 Wynd 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. His muscles tensed as if to carry out the thought, but, after a long moment of indecision, he throttled

down on the desire. He would only have to pick it up again and throw it away.

Growling a curse under his breath, Peter held the can more gingerly in an attempt to reduce the contact between his skin and the area of greasiness and turned to go back to the church. He then spotted the dog a few yards away. Half hidden by the tall grass, it seemed in no mood to come any closer.

Peter felt cock blocked, ineffectual and rejected. 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 Jeffie from leaving and somehow disappearing. Wynd 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. He was being irrational, but reacting rather than thinking had made him a fugitive in the first place.

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 fearing to move, but then it made a decision and slunk away, low and quick. Peter felt certain he'd seen the last of the dog and didn't blame him.

Peter's hand, holding the crushed can, fell limply to his side. He sighed dejectedly as he briefly scrubbed his free hand across his face and then walked back to his work with the sun beating hot on his shoulders. He paused to drop the can in the garbage and then picked up his hoe.

The cooler part of the day had passed but the work still had to be done. Years of neglect wasn't going to fix itself. Maybe Peter 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 should have been a lesson he never forgot, yet he still allowed his temper and poor decisions to continue to slip his control. Wynd had been afraid of doing him damage by sticking around. The truth was that Peter was far more capable of doing his life harm.

Peter pretended to be a straight, pious man who had chosen to be as cloistered as a Catholic priest to better worship God for a reason; he had to remember fewer lies and there was less chance that someone might discover his real identity. Besides, attachments only meant heartbreak. Everyone in his life had left or been taken from him. Duke was the only exception, but he could hardly count him. 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. Everyone sinned, Peter thought sourly, but he still wanted to dismiss the thought of the woman drinking secretly and burying bottles. Williams was his pretend father, which made her his pretend step-mother. Peter lived in the home she had lovingly cared for and he ministered in her church. These flower beds might have been her pride and joy at one time. If the bottles were hers, they were Peter's 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 quarter acre. He had piled all the dead and dying vegetation in a compost bin at the back of the house next to a covered rain barrel positioned under the gutters. A downspout terminated in a

hole in the wooden cover of the rain barrel. That cover lifted off sideways to allow someone to employ the rusty watering can hanging from a hook nearby. On its side faded blue letters spelled out the name *Rebecca*.

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

Peter felt 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 the road 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 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. Wynd might get a few harsh words or dirty looks, but it wasn't a backwoods town in the Appalachians. Peter doubted he would come to any physical harm.

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

Peter wiped sweat off his forehead with the back of his hand and felt sweat also soaking his shirt. Covered in dirt, scratches, and a few bug bites, he needed to shower, shave, and change if he intended 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. Too far removed from cave man days, though, he could only tell it was past noon. His watch, a more precise instrument, 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 Peter, he could find the time; three p.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, not what was prudent.

“Don’t be ridiculous!” he firmly said out loud, “I am not going. Wynd can take care of himself. 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.”

He knew he sounded crazy talking to himself, but he didn’t care.

Peter let the screen door of the house slam shut as an act of finality. He had found the perfect hiding place. No one questioned his identity as Peter Strike. He was not going to endanger himself by getting involved with two guys who were bad news and were going to be gone in a week. Wynd had made the right decision.

Wynd slid down from the cab of the semi and braced himself as his feet hit the sidewalk. He staggered a little and then turned with one hand still on the big passenger side door. He gave the trucker a smile and a wink over the rim of his sunglasses. “Thanks, man. You’re a lifesaver. I didn’t want to walk in that heat.”

The trucker actually blushed and gave him a flustered smile in return. “Welcome, take care.”

“You too, Clyde,” Wynd replied and gave him a jaunty wave and slammed

the big door shut.

Wynd didn't wait to see the rig pull away from the curb as it noisily slipped the brakes and shifted gear, but began walking down the sidewalk as if he hadn't just hitched a ride in it. The driver was already leaving his thoughts. While he had been suggestive and macho in front of the Reverend he had quickly become shy and almost monosyllabic once he was out of sight. After one poor attempt at a pickup line, which Wynd had deftly deflected without bruising his pride too much, Clyde had talked about the weather and how walking in the summer heat could kill a grown man, let alone someone as frail looking as Wynd. Wynd had allowed him to take on the mantle of his rescuer and he was certain, if he ever saw Clyde again, he would give him another ride. Never burn assets, he told himself.

Wynd hated the faux trading town facades of the shops on Windham's main street. Only a month ago he had been living with a Yaghnobi potter in a primitive and mountainous part of Tajikistan. He longed for some real Americana. This Disneyland version included elements from Alaskan natives rather than any local native art and prepackaged and sanitized outdoorsman clothing, equipment, and décor that were designed to make a trapper from the 1800's feel at home while making sure a vacationing tourist, who didn't know which end of a canoe paddle to hold, wouldn't be made uncomfortable.

"It's one of those fag Dao weirdos," a man muttered to a companion as he passed them by. The man wanted Wynd to hear him. He wanted a confrontation.

Wynd didn't acknowledge the slur. He walked like he owned the town, head up and eyes on the horizon as if they were beneath his notice. His steps were steady as he took purposeful strides and acted as if he knew his destination. Some men were emboldened by a show of gay pride, but there were those who found their cajones when a gay man was meek as well. The point being, if they were going to confront him and make trouble, it wouldn't matter how he acted.

The Yaghnobi, who were said to be descended from Sogdians, the same tribe who had given Alexander the Great a great deal of trouble on his long march to India, had nothing, yet walked like kings. A Yaghnobi man had lifted up his chin and told him in bad Russian, “The ground is nothing. Stop staring at it all the time. Look up. The World is out there. Challenge it and spit in its face if it seeks to stop you.” It might not have been true Yaghnobi wisdom, most of them had spent years in exile after the occupation, but it was good advice nonetheless.

The men were wise not to follow Wynd. His attitude wasn't his only defense.

Wynd stopped in front of Jackson's Outfitters. Huge elk horns adorned its frontier themed façade. The elk horns looked like they belonged on a prehistoric beast not on an animal that now walked the rocky hills and forests nearby. A fake horse rail, nail barrels, fake weathered clapboard walls, and the prerequisite rusted wagon wheel were expected but the canned Native American music from tribes in the southwest was an insult to the local tribe. Wynd hated going inside, but felt it necessary if he hoped to complete a full investigation into the disappearance of his friend.

The store smelled like floral sachets. The floor was glossy wood planking. A canoe hung from the ceiling and several different types of canoes were lined up against one wall. They vied for space with fishing gear, hunting and skiing supplies, a gun section, bow and arrow displays, and racks of all-weather clothing.

Store employees, dressed in their khaki uniforms and safari pith helmets, closed in on Wynd immediately. He didn't blame them. The shoplifting habits of the Dao were well known. Camping equipment was expensive and in high demand for a large population of mostly unemployed gypsies. Most members of the Dao wandered into town for a break from the primitive forest and the minimalist lifestyle. They also needed to buy food and equipment. Those that couldn't afford to pay often stole or begged for money on the streets. A few had

actual skills playing music, singing, or doing odd jobs. They could get a few dollars plying those skills within the Dao itself, but begging on a street corner with a simply made sign written on cardboard, was often more successful.

“I don’t need any help and I’m not here to make any trouble,” Wynd told them as they surrounded him. They were all wearing disapproving frowns.

Wynd slowly pulled his cell phone out of the small handmade, multicolored pouch tied around his small waist. It was an expensive model, the clear case covered in a mint colored line drawing of a Hindu design. The screensaver was an animated steampunk design of metal cogs in a machine, as if his phone operated like a wind up watch. The Yaghnobi potter had laughed in delight at the contrast of ancient and industrial, his appreciation and understanding not limited by his lack of a formal education. These employees, some of them probably holding worthless college degrees, didn’t see the humor at all as he put in his password and opened up the picture of Jeffie.

“I’m looking for my friend. He goes by Jeffie.” Wynd felt frustrated when only two actually looked at the photo. He held it towards them and panned it so they were forced to look or be blatantly rude. Well trained salespeople avoided being rude almost instinctively; even to a member of the Dao they were trying to prevent from stealing. When he was sure they had all looked at the photo, he lowered his phone.

“He was getting bored with the Dao,” he told them. His next words were mostly lies. He didn’t have much information as to why Jeffie had disappeared, but false information sometimes made people speak up to correct the record when they might have stayed silent. “Jeffie talked about meeting someone from this town who promised him a job. He planned to make enough money to take the bus back to his home. He told me he would call me. He didn’t. He was last seen at Reverend Strike’s New Hope church. Are any of you members? You might have seen him there last Sunday.”

“No.” The tall, dark haired man who replied made a show of looking down his nose at Wynd and scowling harder. He looked ridiculous in his pith helmet

though and that lessened his intended effect. His oval name badge read Mark under the title of Assistant Manager.

“Can I get more than a no?” Wynd wondered.

“No, means we haven’t seen him,” said a young saleswoman with long, straight brown hair and expensive invisible braces that weren’t exactly invisible. She stood slightly behind his manager as if she feared Wynd might become violent or contaminate her in some way. “You need to go, right Mark?”

“You do need to go, sir,” Mark agreed. “I answered your question.”

A fat red head that looked stuffed into his uniform like a sausage trying to burst out of a casing was blushing and uncertain, but his fellow employee, a Hispanic man who looked like he weighed less than Wynd and seemed twice his age scowled and looked ready to grab him. They inched forward to intimidate Wynd, but waited for their manager to okay forcing Wynd’s exit.

“I don’t want any trouble, I’m just looking for some answers,” Wynd insisted, but in the end he left the shop without any information rather than cause trouble.

Wynd now had an indicator of the level of dislike for the Dao members. Though Jeffie looked like the personification of a beautiful California boy, the Dao didn’t have the resources to maintain his appearance. The organizers of the Dao’s disinterest in providing even basic sanitation was criminal, but when citations were being handed out by law enforcement they managed to prove they weren’t in fact responsible for the massive crowds that now attended what had once been a modest meeting of like-minded souls. Looking dirty and disheveled, Jeffie would have known he would be confronted and forced out of the more main stream establishments. He had probably avoided them in favor of ones who didn’t mind a person with a few twigs in his hair, muddy shoes, and limited resources.

Wynd still had few facts. Jeffie had gone missing Saturday after expressing his view that the Dao wasn’t as exciting as he had been lead to believe. Finding someone willing to leave in the midst of the Dao had probably been impossible.

Jeffie had been seen by Reverend Strike walking back towards the Dao on Sunday, perhaps after a fruitless search in town for a ride back home. He had not returned to the Dao, though, and it was clear by signs only Dao members knew that he hadn't taken the trail that led back to the campsite. That meant he had either returned to the highway to hitch a ride or something bad had happened to him. The lack of a call or a text from him made Wynd lean towards the latter explanation, as much as he didn't want to.

Wynd wished Jeffie had taken his advice and waited until after the Dao was over. Even the Dao wasn't a hundred percent safe, but there had been rumors that wandering outside of its borders invited attacks from the people in the surrounding community. Since members went missing every year, Wynd was inclined to believe them.

Wynd hadn't dismissed the handsome Reverend Strike from his list of suspects, even though he appeared harmless. Something about him made Wynd suspicious, but his instincts didn't identify Strike as a killer. It was possible Strike knew more than he was saying. If Wynd's investigation of the town came up empty, he needed to visit Strike again.

A young native boy that looked to be seven years old sat on a nail barrel in front of a bare bones coffee bar holding a tray of small paper cups. Wearing ripped blue jeans and a red tank top, his jet black hair was tied in two long braids. He squinted at Wynd, whether in irritation or because he was farsighted he couldn't tell.

"Best coffee in town," the boy said automatically.

Wynd studied him from behind his glasses as he took a small paper cup and sipped. The cold coffee tasted like hazelnut and local herbs.

"Chinook," Wynd said, trying to guess the boy's tribe.

"No." The boy managed a tone that made that single word an insult questioning his intelligence.

"Tchinouk."

"I guess." He shrugged. "Ask grandpa."

Wynd knew a few phrases. The boy stared at him blankly when he used them now.

“Not a native speaker?” Wynd wondered.

“What do you think?”

“Hard times.”

The boy sneered. “The Chinook make it harder, or so grandpa says. He speaks it.”

“He’s inside?”

The boy was instantly suspicious. “Why do you care?”

Wynd started to take another sample of the coffee. The boy waved his hand away.

“Only one sample!” he barked officially. “If you want more, you have to pay. This isn’t charity.”

“You must see a lot of people walk by.” Wynd pulled his phone out, scrolled to the photo of Jeffie and showed it to him.

The boy looked cautiously and then nodded. “I’ve seen him. Sheriff Rio harassed him and made him cry. I felt bad for him so I gave him an extra coffee. When he left, he headed towards the Hippy Emporium.”

“Hippy Emporium?”

“That’s what ma calls it. It’s a fancy gardening place run by an old kook. He sells pot on the side. End of Main, hang a left, Salmon Run St.”

“Thanks.”

“You’re not going to buy coffee?”

“I’m poor and you said no charity, remember?” Wynd arched an eyebrow at him and laughed at the boy’s disgusted expression as Wynd turned on his heel and followed the boy’s directions.

Chapter Three

Peter dreamed of climbing the hill near the church. It seemed impossibly tall and craggy now instead of the slight rise it was in real life. Crows flew in and out of the tall grass, dark wings fluttering like ragged flags. An actual colored flag, flapping in a breeze Peter didn't feel, marked the path. The top of the hill was dark, the trees towering shadows against a gray sky. In a weird contrast, he seemed to glow with a sickly pale light. The gray sky and the dark trees crouched on the perimeter of that light as if they were malevolent entities in some fairy tale.

As Peter neared the trees, a man shaped shadow broke from the others. Peter's fairy tale like dream abruptly transformed into a nightmare. He felt a jolt of fear, convinced the shadow could only be the real Peter Strike about to confront him and demand his life back. Peter couldn't stop walking, though, even though his terror increased with every step. When he was finally close enough to see the figure's identity, he saw that it wasn't the real Peter. It was Jeffie. Illuminated by Peter's light, he seemed pale, his skin and eyes as colorless as a dead fish. All of his sexual allure had been extinguished. His clothes were soaking wet and clung to his body. His hair was also wet, the blonde darkened and hanging flat against the sides of his face like strands of seaweed.

Jeffie asked, 'Where's Daniel?' in a thin reedy voice, as if he couldn't draw air into his lungs. 'He promised to take care of me,' he complained.

'Who's Daniel?' Peter asked.

Jeffie's pale face frowned and he seemed about to reply, but something suddenly propelled Peter out of the nightmare. In a cold sweat, he sat up in bed abruptly, heart pounding and his body shaking with fear. A dog barked in the distance, sharp and steady. He wondered if that had pulled him from the nightmare. He was grateful and he imagined the dog was Loco when in fact it could have been any farm dog roaming the countryside. Though he had asked

the dream Jeffie a question, Peter felt an acute revulsion towards him. He was glad Jeffie hadn't answered.

Peter couldn't sleep after that and he spent the rest of the night wondering what the dream meant. In the end, he decided that his dream of a drowned Jeffie had been brought into being because he worried about Wynd's safety. That analysis gave him the strength to finally calm his fears and dismiss the superstitious belief it was a bad omen. It left him exhausted, mentally and physically, making him ill prepared when someone knocked on his kitchen door when the sun was barely a glimmer of coral color on the tops of the mountains.

Dressed in a short sleeve black dress shirt and black slacks, Peter was adjusting his priest collar as he watched a morning news program on his laptop. It was opened up on the kitchen table with his toast and orange juice next to it. When the knock came, he quickly closed the computer and put it on the seat of a chair under the table as if he had something to hide. Old habits die hard.

The house was as old as the church and it followed that odd cultural architecture where special guests were ushered through a tidy foyer and tea room, but friends and businessmen were encouraged by way of a gravel path to enter through the kitchen door. It was on that wide granite stoop, standing outside the screen door, where he found Sheriff Dario Padilla.

The big man wore a green polyester uniform and a big black utility belt full of equipment and weapons. It spoke of a progression of violence he was ready to deal out to a suspect resisting arrest. First he would talk. Having failed that, the taser would then come into play. If that didn't make a man go quietly, he had a long, heavy looking black chrome flashlight. As a last resort, he had a gun, a pearl handled colt 45.

Padilla wasn't one of Peter's parishioners. He had introduced himself to Peter during a *Blessing of God's Creatures* fundraiser in the town square several months ago. He had urged Peter to call him 'Rio'. Peter remembered

Padilla laughing good-naturedly and giving a donation after Reverend Williams had skillfully argued that even though Padilla wasn't a parishioner, he should still support those who did God's work.

When it came to fundraising for the church, Reverend Williams had employed his own progression of weapons. If a gentle suggestion to the people in line waiting to have their pets blessed hadn't worked, he had employed a serious guilt trip by bringing up problems with the church that were in need of repair. If that hadn't worked, his preverbal *colt 45* had been to ruthlessly impart the belief that receiving a blessing after a donation to the church was more effective than one without.

Padilla took off his Sheriff's hat and held it in his hands respectfully. His hair was black and close cropped, almost in a military flat top. Moths, attracted to the light, whirled around his head briefly like ghosts before seeking out the porch light. They fluttered there in a frenetic dance, courting death from the large frog sitting on the wall that had been waiting for just such an opportunity.

Peter kept the screen door closed; irrationally reasoning that he could use the flimsy barrier to block the Sheriff if the man was there to arrest him for impersonating a priest. Peter's pulse raced and his armpits were suddenly damp as he broke out in a nervous sweat.

Peter tried to keep his voice calm, but wasn't very successful as he said, "Good morning, Sheriff Padilla." Peter was sure this wasn't the time to refer to the Sheriff as 'Rio'.

"Good morning, Reverend Strike."

They stood awkwardly staring at each other, Padilla partially obscured by the screen door. Obviously he wasn't going to continue until Peter opened it. The longer Peter refused to do so the more his nervousness and reluctance would seem suspicious. He didn't think he could pretend to be afraid of insects and frogs getting into the house.

"What brings you out so early in the morning?" Peter continued,

congratulated himself on keeping his voice steadier this time. The door creaked alarmingly as he finally opened it and continued to hold it open when the officer didn't move to enter the kitchen or take hold of it himself. Peter continued apologetically, "I'm not catholic and can't take confession, but I can open the church if you need to pray."

Padilla worried the brim of his hat with his thick fingers. He had big hands, hands that looked like they could deal with criminals easily. Peter could imagine those thick fingers around his neck, crushing his windpipe. Innocent people didn't contemplate such things, he told himself, but he was not an innocent.

It was possible Peter's expression reflected his thoughts. Padilla was staring at him intently as he replied, "Thank you for the offer, but I'm agnostic."

Peter had assumed Padilla was catholic like many Hispanics. Assuming anything was always a mistake. Padilla spoke with a Midwestern accent that had subtle traces of a Canadian one. Peter could no more assume Padilla was making beans and rice for his breakfast and attending Catholic mass, than he could be expected to practice Islam and eat goat and yams because of his African roots. Padilla's dark eyes were apologetic, though, not threatening, or angry about his wrong assumption. Those eyes reassured Peter he wasn't about to see the business end of Padilla's flashlight.

Padilla said, "I believe a man should be left alone until 8 am, but Tavis Crowley and a filed police report dictated otherwise."

Though Peter had never seen Tavis Crowley, he had interacted with him through paperwork he had filed. Crowley was on the town council. His reputation for obstructing building permits of any kind, even small repairs to houses and storefronts, was well earned. He had rejected Peter's permit to replace the gravel driveway of the church with an asphalt one. Crowley had stated in his rejection letter that the church and the house attached to it had to adhere to the historical accuracy of a landmark building. It seemed

Reverend Williams had submitted the old church as a historical landmark to receive city funds. It was too bad those funds were only given to historical renovations that met with the council's approval. Reverend Williams should have read the small print before he put the church under the city's purview.

"I understand." Peter opened the screen door wider. One of the moths broke away from the light and fluttered inside, leaving its companion in its death spiral towards the hungry looking frog. "Would you like to come in? I was about to make a fresh pot of coffee."

One of the Sheriff's hands left his hat and stroked the handle of his colt, but it seemed a habit rather than a threat. "No thanks, Reverend. I'm just as anxious as you are to get to my breakfast."

Padilla's eyes slid past Peter to the orange juice and the toast on the kitchen table; one growing warm and the other growing cold. Padilla's expression was fleetingly disapproving. Peter imagined a large man like him ate a dozen eggs and half a cow every morning. Padilla wasn't fat but he was very large and Peter could tell he indulged in long sessions at the gym and probably bulked up on proteins.

"You know about the Dao?" Padilla asked unexpectedly.

Pleasantries were over, Padilla's tone said. It was time for police work. Peter nodded yes to Padilla's question and frowned, trying to project the appearance of a concerned citizen.

"One of Dao members is missing," Padilla continued. "Nothing new, of course, but I was told the missing man attended your church service Sunday. Is that true?"

Nothing new? Obviously he was talking about Jeffie. He sounded dismissive of him, as if his life wasn't important. Peter suddenly didn't like Sheriff Padilla.

"He sat at the back of the church for a very short time and then left," Peter told him. "He didn't look as if he was in any trouble. I thought at the time he might have come in to get out of the heat."

“Did he speak to you?”

The intensity of Padilla’s tone when he asked that question alerted Peter that the answer was important to him. Peter was glad he could tell the Sheriff the truth. “No, no one spoke to him.”

“And you didn’t encounter him before Sunday, or after?”

“No.”

The handcuffs on Padilla’s belt jingled together as he planted one foot on the rise of the doorway. He rested his weight on that foot as if he fully intended to use his purchase there to propel himself forward into Peter’s home.

Peter tensed apprehensively. He was sorry, now, that he had jettisoned his gun with his old life. He had been firmly convinced at the time that he wouldn’t need it. Not that he could foresee, even now, pulling a weapon on Sheriff Padilla. There was a difference between owning a gun and having the balls to use it. On the night the real Peter Strike had saved his life, Peter had been too terrified to use it to defend either of their lives.

Padilla only seemed thoughtful, though, not interested in recreating a super bowl tackle to his midsection. A few moments seemed to stretch into an eternity. Finally, Padilla shifted his weight backward and his thick, leather utility belt creaked as his foot left the doorstep. He put on his hat and gave the brim a brush of his fingers, as if making certain it was centered and correct.

Padilla nodded to Peter and began to turn away from the door as he said, “Thank you for your time, Reverend. These weird kids, you know? Homeless, most of them, and traveling like a band of gypsies from place to place. I think this guy might have come to his senses and left the Dao for good, or just wandered off to the next town without telling anyone. Who can blame him? Every year there are rapes, murders, drug overdoses, and people who just disappear. That area is probably full of bones.”

Peter felt a chill as he imagined a forest full of weather washed bones half hidden among tree roots and under clumps of green, lacy ferns. People swore

Tammany State Park was haunted by the former Native American residents who still held grudges. He could easily imagine a few outraged ghosts of Boho gypsies in the mix. It made him think of his nightmare starring Jeffie. Peter found it hard not to be superstitious with the dawn not yet clearing away all the deeper shadows.

Padilla paused in his turn. He waited for a reply. The conversational ball was in Peter's court and he had failed to hit it. He mentally scrambled for a reply. He sounded lame as he finally stammered, "I-I'll pray for this man to be found safe and sound."

"Thank you, Reverend. Have a good morning," Padilla said as he nodded and finished his turn. He disappeared into the shadows, dress shoes crunching on the gravel of the drive as he made his way to the front of the church where he had most likely left his patrol car.

"Shit," Peter muttered under his breath. His hand was still on the screen door, flat against the dew damp screening material. He stared at it sightlessly, his thoughts whirling with relief and anxiety. Something in Padilla's attitude warned him that the man wasn't completely satisfied. Perhaps there was something about Jeffie's case that Peter didn't know about that made his answers suspect.

"Reverend?"

Peter's heart lurched and began beating wildly in panic, as if he was having a heart attack. His hand almost went through the screen material as he started badly and focused on Padilla standing just inside the light on the gravel path. How long had he been quietly watching him?

"S-Sheriff? I almost met my maker just now." Peter tried to sound light hearted, but his voice was both accusatory and unsteady.

"Sorry, Reverend." Padilla seemed genuinely apologetic. "Animals have been in your garbage can. You're new to these parts. I thought I should warn you to secure your garbage where animals can't reach it. We do have bears here. They can be dangerous."

“Thank you. I’ll do that.”

Padilla nodded and left again, leaving Peter shaking and in a cold sweat.

Peter let the screen door bang closed and thought, *damn dog*, as he closed the door as well and locked it. Not that a locked door was any kind of security in that old house.

The house, with its worn wood floors, whitewashed walls, and décor, looked straight out of the 1950s. It was a typical shotgun design; a front and back door with a living room and kitchen connected by a long hallway that had rooms on either side. The house had windows that were large, old, and loose in their casings. None of the front windows had curtains and a person could easily see the kitchen even down the long hallway. It wouldn’t take a master thief to break in and it certainly didn’t take a master spy with specialized equipment to surveil him. Peter might as well have been living in a glass house.

Peter took the only refuge from prying eyes, sitting on the one side of the heavy oak kitchen table that was hidden by cabinetry and a large refrigerator. He pulled his laptop from the chair beside him and placed it on top of the table again. Opening it up, he turned it back on and began watching his news program once more while he ate his cold toast and drank his warm orange juice. He lost himself in world events and refused to notice his cowardice.

Peter didn’t leave the house to chase the dog away from his garbage even though he imagined the dog strewing it all over the property. He didn’t check to see if Padilla had actually left. Crickets were still singing. The shadows were still hugging the landscape and probably making his empty flower beds look like graves. Those shadows could hide bears, Padilla, ghosts, or the murderer of a Boho gypsy.

Peter was truly starting to think of him as dead. Maybe he should believe in prayer and offer a few, asking for his safety as he had promised Padilla? Life had taught Peter to be skeptical of miracles, though, and while the orphanage had instilled in him a belief in a higher power he feared that power because of

the shady life he had chosen to lead. He always avoided contemplating the afterlife. He didn't see an ascending stairway to Heaven in his future. Surely there was a special Hell for gay men who impersonated priests and stole the lives of deceased heroes?

He heard his garbage can rattle. Peter turned the volume on his news program higher and ignored the sound as he swatted at the moth trying to hover near his face.

After finding the door of a vacation log cabin rental unlocked last evening, Wynd had slipped in unnoticed. Afraid to risk a light, he had availed himself of the shower in the gloom of a sinking sun and had used touch alone to find a blanket in a closet. He had spent the night wrapped up in that blanket on a mattress devoid of sheets and had awakened moaning with pleasure after a dream encounter with Reverend Strike. It had starred the man's dream 12 inch cock. Wynd had worshipped it with his sucking mouth and talented tongue until Peter Strike had shot his load in Wynd's face. In the dream there had been gallons of it and Wynd fuzzily recalled taking a bath in it after. When Wynd awoke, he chuckled, but the erection he had to take care of that morning wasn't funny. He came hard and left the bed early to clean up.

His mother had always told Wynd to leave a place better than how he had found it. That included cabins he hadn't paid for. Though technically it wasn't breaking and entering since the door had been unlocked, Wynd doubted he would get much sympathy in a local court of opinion. In the court of his own mind, he felt guilty, so he soothed his conscience by making sure he left no traces of his visit. In the false dawn light, he folded the blanket and placed it back in the closet and he made sure his hairs were not in the shower drain.

No one saw Wynd slip out of the cabin while dawn was barely illuminating the mountain tops with bright coral colors. The other cabins, arranged in a semi-circle, were dark, their inhabitants still sleeping.

An owl startled him as it flew low to the ground and then soared upward

into the darkness of some trees. It was white and ghostly in its silent flight. Wynd touched the white owl feather bound in his dread locks. Wynd wasn't superstitious for the most part, but in his childhood, he had spent a great deal of time with different aboriginal tribes in different parts of the world. In most cultures a white animal was seen as sacred. He might not believe it was the ghost of his ancestors, or an evil spirit, but he couldn't help acknowledging the low probability of seeing a white owl without attaching some significance to it. He changed the direction he intended to go and took a more circular route back into the town, around a small lake wreathed in fog. That fog was like a localized blanket of cotton hiding him from easy sight.

The road was uneven under his feet and empty of traffic. Crickets were still singing, but birds were beginning to stir and call to one another as the rising sun grew more pronounced and began painting the landscape with white, pink, and rarified blues. He was still walking in false light, though, and the fog, and they probably saved him from detection when he heard voices up ahead.

There was no reason to believe he was in danger. The outskirts of town were close. If he screamed, someone at the cabins would hear him. Well versed in the stupidity of criminals, though, Wynd knew their violent urges often superseded fear of discovery or even common sense.

Wynd had passed that way in the dark the evening before and hadn't seen the pond. He didn't know if it had a gentle bank or a rocky twenty foot drop to the water. The trees and brush had been pushed back from the road, but they offered places where the night still ruled. As the footsteps drew nearer, he took the risk and hurried into that darkness.

Something hit him at knee level. Going too fast to stop, Wynd pitched forward and tumbled into something with unforgiving hard edges that slammed into tender parts of his body. He smelled pine needles, rotten leaves, and old wood as he forced himself to lay face down and not cry out. His head swam and his pulse was racing wildly as he convulsed with the need to cough

and gasp for air. He took deep, steady breaths instead and long moments passed before he became aware that the people on the road were very close.

“I heard something,” a man said.

“Chicken shit,” said another man who sounded much older.

“A careful man lives longer,” said a third man who, while the others had sounded local, he had a distinctive Midwestern accent colored by a Canadian one.

“Chicken shit,” the second man repeated. “Doesn’t matter if anyone knows we’re arresting him. He’s breaking and entering. Smackley called it in when he heard the water pump behind the cabin kick in. It’s all legal.”

“Smackley called it in last night.” the first man pointed out.

“And I explained we were on another case,” the third man assured them. “It’s safer to catch a Dao Hippy while they’re sleeping, but I don’t like operations in the dark. Who knows what kind of weapons this man might have?”

“You think he’s armed?” the first exclaimed.

“Chicken shit,” the second reiterated firmly.

“Most of them are pacifists, socialists, and unemployed pot smokers,” the third assured them. “Not the type of people to have either the money or the inclination to carry a gun. Knives are a possibility though.”

They men were moving past Wynd. He could easily keep track of them, not only by the sound of their footsteps, but also by nature’s alarm system. The frogs and crickets stopped croaking and singing as the men approached and then began again in their wake.

Wynd chewed on his lip, trembling as he fought the urge to jump up and get away from non-human attackers. Mosquitos were biting his naked arms and finding their way through his tank top and leggings. A frog that sounded of considerable size began croaking near his ear. Also, Wynd’s elbow rested on something sharp. With each passing moment the sense that it was only a splinter and a minor pain, magnified until he imaged a harpoon causing him

terrible agony.

When the voices of the men finally began to fade because of distance and the rising sound of a cricket chorus, Wynd finally dared to ease his arm off of the sharp object.

“They’re growing impatient,” the man with the hint of a Canadian accent suddenly said. His anxiety about that statement made his voice louder and clearer than the others.

Wynd froze, unconsciously holding his breath.

“That man they sent this time,” he continued, “he makes my balls retract. If we don’t make our quota, I don’t think any of us are safe. Don’t screw this arrest up, Chicken Shit.”

“Stop calling me that!” the first man whined and continued to whine until their voices became indistinct.

Wynd finally dared to sit up. The sunrise was chasing away the shadows and the fog was no longer impenetrable. He tried not to groan as he felt scrapes and bruises on the front half of his body. There was enough light now to see that he had fallen into an old canoe someone had left to rot. The large frog balanced on the canoe’s side. A pale, frightening shape, it made Wynd start violently as it jumped past his face and landed on one of the wooden seats. It had a cricket in its mouth, gumming it slowly as it blinked at him.

Shuddering, Wynd exited the canoe as quietly as he could manage. As he straightened his clothes and took stock of his injuries, he thought about what he had heard. He allowed himself to assume that someone had seen him in town and perhaps walking in the direction of the cabins. That someone had reported it to those men. When Smackley, the likely owner of the rental cabins, called about a possible squatter, those men had good cause to believe it was him

Wynd walked back to the road and headed for town at a fast pace. Those men would take time to approach and enter the cabin in an attempt to take him unawares. When they discovered that he wasn’t there, they might assume

he was in the surrounding woods and search there first. They wouldn't think they had passed him on the road.

A patrol car was parked on the side of the road. Wynd looked inside as he walked past it. A laptop on a swivel stand was showing a Google Earth picture of the cabins and all roads leading in and out of the area. Most of them were rural dirt tracks.

Having confirmed that the men were police officers, Wynd was even more determined to put distance between him and the cabins. Something about their voices told him they wouldn't make a distinction between his being found in the cabin and simply being suspected of having slept the night there. It would be harder for them to arrest him for it if he was in town and among people who might question their interpretation of the law. At least he hoped people would question them.

The people in the Dao were thoroughly disliked. Even the gentle seeming soul, Ruthie, who ran Ruthie's Garden Center and Emporium, and who had seemed a free spirit herself, had been less than welcoming when Wynd had asked her about Jeffie the day before. She had told Wynd that Jeffie had eaten some of her plants, had asked for a job, and had begged customers for money before she had asked Jeffie to leave. Her tone had implied that Wynd should leave as well. Wynd hadn't argued. He had felt the woman's eyes boring into him as he had walked out of the garden center chain link gates and taken the road that lead to the cabins.

Wynd's mind had an '*aha!*' moment. He thought he now knew who had tipped off authorities that someone from the Dao was loitering in the vicinity of the cabins.

Wynd passed the chain link fence and the closed gates of the Garden Center and Emporium. Roses were using the fence as a trellis, cascading over the side in a riot of pink and red and dripping with morning dew. A morning glory, winding in and out of the roses, added a white accent as it opened its pedals to the morning light.

There was the smell of frying eggs in the air. Ruthie must live on the property, Wynd thought. Wynd's stomach growled and he thought about how long it had been since he had eaten a meal. As he reached the town, he decided to stay hidden though. He took a seat on the wooden back stoop of the Native owned coffee shop to wait for the streets to become busy enough to make a police officer think twice before arresting him without proof he had committed a crime. He had to displace a lizard first with a murmured, "Sorry." It was sitting in a spot of sun, warming its cold blood. It was gray and brown with a small blotch of black along its left back leg that might have been mud.

A few lodge pole pines and the barbed tangle of a runaway blackberry bush joined a six foot plastic cedar colored fence to make a barrier between the shops and an upscale housing development. The pines blocked some of the morning light and made a lacey pattern of shadows and sun spots on the dirty gravel parking spaces and a narrow access road. Birds were singing and cicadas were already beginning to drone.

There was an old gray Buick in one of the gravel parking space. The engine still pinging with heat, telling Wynd that the employees of the coffee shop had just arrived. He heard them moving about inside the shop and the smell of coffee began filling the air. His stomach growled again. To distract himself, he went over recent events and committed every detail he could recall to memory and to a file on his phone.

"Wynd?"

He started and looked up from his phone. He recognized the man walking towards him.

Graymonger, a handsome man in his twenties, had blonde dreads, a blond goatee, and a beaded brown leather patch over one eye. His brown yoga pants made out of hemp, leather sandals, and a cream colored homespun tunic were meant to make him look like any poor, gypsy Dao member, but Wynd knew his clothing was made by a designer label and he owned an expensive red Ducati motorcycle. Like many in the Dao, he wasn't who he pretended to be. To

impress Wynd, he had claimed to be an important person in the Dao hierarchy and Wynd had seen him go into the temporary dome prefab buildings where the *Anarchists*, as they called themselves, lived. That was an exclusive invitation few were granted.

Wynd doubted that the irony of a group that called themselves anarchists insisting on a rigid class system was lost on the members of the Dao, but most of them were there for the party. Original members could whine about the old days being a free love fest without rules or leaders, but it hadn't been hard to discover from Graymonger that the Anarchists had always been in charge and that their memories were faulty. Wynd had cultivated Graymonger's attraction to him in hopes of getting invited into the inner sanctum, but he seemed nervous, almost afraid, whenever Wynd suggested it.

Graymonger put his foot on the first step of the stoop and leaned towards Wynd. He smelled like cinnamon and rum, which made Wynd remember the Old Spice aftershave his father used. The small golden beads Graymonger had woven into his beard and dread locks sparkled in the morning light. His one eye was a bright sky blue, so brightly blue in fact that Wynd wondered if he was wearing a colored contact. That eye looked Wynd over critically, noting his scrapes, small bruises, and slightly disheveled appearance.

"Someone rough you up, darling?" Graymonger asked. He liked to affect a drawling British accent, even though Wynd knew he had spent most of his life in Seattle. He was playing pirate, Wynd thought with amusement. It made him that much more attractive.

"I fell in the woods."

Graymonger made a *tisk-tisk* sound and said, "You could have spent the night with me, snug and warm, and not cold in the woods."

"It wasn't cold."

Graymonger put a hand to his heart as if it hurt him. "You wound me. I'm not better company than toads and mosquitoes?"

"You are, but toads and mosquitos are less complicated."

Graymonger smiled. His teeth were even and bright white, another tell that he wasn't a poor. "I can be as uncomplicated as you like, darling."

"I'll remember that."

"I'll take that as a promise of a later rendezvous."

Wynd smiled at him and nodded, but then he looked down at his hands and pretended to be coy. He wasn't opposed to having sex with Graymonger. In fact, hearing Graymonger's British accent say dirty things while he fucked Wynd could be a definite turn on. It was possible, though, that playing hard to get might make Graymonger more likely to try to impress Wynd to change his mind. Wynd wanted into the inner sanctum of the Dao and Graymonger was his best chance for that.

The back door of the coffee shop and the screen door opened and Graymonger looked up with anticipation. "Ah, breakfast is served," he whispered.

A young Native American woman with a spiky punk hair style dyed pink and blue and dressed in a tan western shirt, blue jeans, and overlarge brown cowboy boots squinted at them with an expression of annoyance. It was obvious she was expecting them and didn't approve of their presence. Wynd almost stood up, ready to leave, but Graymonger lightly put a hand on his arm to keep him there.

"Morning, darling," Graymonger said and gave the woman his best smile.

The woman grunted sourly and went back inside, letting the screen door slam shut. She kept the main door open though and returned a few moments later with two cups of coffee in paper cups, held expertly in one hand by their bottoms, and a paper bag. She used her hip to open the screen door and held the drinks and the bag out to them.

Wynd felt awkward as he and Graymonger tried to take the items at the same time. Wynd finally took a cup and Graymonger took the other cup and the bag. The cup was very hot and Wynd gingerly moved it from one hand to the other.

The coffee shop woman grunted sourly again and went back inside the shop. She let the screen door slam shut and Wynd could hear her doing some sort of work inside that made lots of rustling and rattling noises.

“That’s the nicest I’ve been treated by anyone in this town,” Wynd said as he took the plastic lid off of his coffee cup and smelled the spicy aroma appreciatively. It smelled like cinnamon and some other aromatic herbs he couldn’t identify.

Graymonger had put the bag down and he was opening his coffee cup as well. “I’m not sure if it’s a native custom, a throwback to the 1950’s, or she doesn’t like taking their garbage to the dumpster that much.”

Graymonger toasted Wynd with his cup. “Don’t worry, darling, I’ll do the work for us both.”

“Always the gentlemen,” Wynd said and chuckled.

Graymonger winked as he sipped his coffee and then said after he swallowed, “Not always, but some gents like it that way.”

He was dangling an offer again. Wynd could play him only so long. He hadn’t reached the limit yet, but he was flirting with the line drawn in the sand when he asked, “I need to look around town. Do you mind being my ride?”

Graymonger pulled a white icing covered pastry from the bag and considered it as he replied, “Do I mind having a beautiful man on the back of my motorcycle? Not in the least. Why the tour though?”

Wynd reached into the bag and found another pastry. The tan frosting on his pastry smelled like maple syrup. “I promised I would watch after Jeffie, but he left the Dao and didn’t come back. I want to make sure he didn’t get into trouble.”

Wynd took a bite of his pastry. It *was* maple flavored and had a generous amount of cream cheese at its center. Graymonger pulled a napkin out of the bag and dabbed at the corner of Wynd’s mouth. Wynd allowed it as he made appreciative sounds and swallowed his bite.

Graymonger looked at his napkin and smiled. “You don’t wear lipstick. That really is the color of your lips. Rose red.”

“Sounds like the beginning of a fairy tale,” Wynd replied.

Graymonger looked comically sad. “I can’t claim to be a prince.”

“Good. I’m not either.”

Graymonger’s smile became sexy. He really was a handsome man, Wynd thought. Graymonger assured him, “I will treat you as if you were.”

Wynd hoped he would at least remain a gentleman. Wynd wasn’t interested in a casual hookup and he didn’t like using physical sex to manipulate people. A Mexican Catemaco Brujo once told him that sex was a powerful magic connected to his soul. When he used sex for ill purposes a little bit of his soul turned to stone. It was for love and healing only. While he could dismiss the shaman’s long religious conversation that had mixed Catholicism with an ancient religion, he couldn’t deny the heavy depression he felt after such acts.

Wynd finished his pastry and licked his fingers. “They make excellent coffee and pastries.”

“The pastries come from the bakery three doors down. That’s where that lovely aroma of baking bread is coming from,” Graymonger told him. He took a deep breath and closed his eye momentarily as he enjoyed the scent. “I’m getting some of that before I return to the Dao.”

Graymonger’s sky blue eye opened again and regarded him with an apologetic expression. “I have to pay for our breakfast with some manual labor. Enjoy the rest of your coffee, darling.”

He put the uneaten half of his pastry into the bag and closed it up. He had finished his coffee. He held onto the empty cup as he placed the bag next to him on the stoop.

Wynd asked curiously, “Why not just pay for it? You obviously have money.”

Graymonger pressed his empty cup against his heart dramatically and replied sadly, “I am a man blessed with rich things, but not with a full bank

account. Daddy's trust only allows me so much money a year and I make bad choices."

Wynd laughed and said, "If your choices make you happy, they aren't bad choices. I'll wait here until you're done. Thank you for doing my share of the work."

"My Daddy would beg to differ with your philosophy, but I appreciate it." Graymonger seemed pleased that his lack of money wasn't causing Wynd to leave immediately. "I'll return as soon as I may, fair Prince Wynd." He gave Wynd a small bow.

"Thank you, gallant Graymonger."

Wynd watched him open the screen door and go inside the shop to get his work list. Wynd wished he was as gallant and as truthful as he appeared, but Wynd had seen the most pleasant demeanor hide the blackest heart. He reminded himself Graymonger was privy to the inner circle of the Dao and, in Wynd's experience; they never chose poor gallant gypsies with no connections. Wynd hadn't relished investigating the entire town on foot, and Graymonger was going to be tremendous help, but Wynd wasn't going to lower his guard.

It took Graymonger nearly a half hour to finish his work. He passed by Wynd several times with garbage cans and to wring out a mop to one side of the stoop. On one of those trips, he paused briefly.

"Hold out your hand, Darling."

Wynd obeyed cautiously. Graymonger dropped something onto his upraised palm. It was a leather necklace with a bear totem pendant carved from a purple stone and a tiny white feather attached to its back.

Wynd blinked stupidly at it as he tried to make sense of a man who took out garbage and cleaned floors to pay for coffee and pastries, but then bought him a gift.

"Two Birds said you were a bear," Graymonger informed Wynd with a smile and shrugged. "How he knows that without seeing you is anyone's guess. It's a pretty thing, though. Do you like it?"

Wynd put it on and centered it on his chest with his numerous other necklaces. “Thank you. You do realize that breakfast and jewelry won’t buy sex?” Unless he was the Reverend Peter Strike, Wynd thought, but then wondered how he had developed such an interest in the priest when they had barely spoken. Something secretive about the Reverend intrigued Wynd. He always did love a mystery.

Graymonger was laughing. “That’s what Two Birds said. Don’t worry, Darling. I’ll only take what you’re offering.”

Graymonger gave Wynd a cheeky wink and continued with his work.

Peter didn't venture outside until the sun beat back the shadows and made the world a bright and peaceful place again. He knew that peace was a lie, though, because murderers and Sheriffs weren't ghosts that only haunted at night and bears weren't nocturnal.

Peter carried a bowl of water and a paper plate full of scraps down the gravel path that led to the garbage can with some hope that a bribe might keep Loco from demolishing his garbage can further and strewing his garbage all over the property. Halfway there, he realized it was an act of futility and wondered if he had a subconscious ulterior motive. He wasn't going to thwart Loco's desire for orange rinds and rotten egg shells, so why try? Did he still hope to befriend Loco?

When Peter reached his tipped over garbage can and the wide area now covered in trash, he put the paper plate and bowl of water down. He wondered in disgust how he had survived the mean city streets with such pixie dust hopes and dreams. His short time living the country life had made him soft—soft in the head.

Peter righted the garbage can with a clang of metal against gravel and cleaned up the strewn garbage. Mindful of the sheriff's warning, and determined to keep Loco out of his garbage once and for all, he carried the full can to a small wooden garden shed butted up against one side of the house.

The shed smelled strongly of gas and oil from the old lawnmower and bug spray in an old metal sprayer. Gardening tools, hung along the walls of the shed, still smelled like the dirt he had turned over the day before. Peter was certain the heat would cook the garbage and make the smell in the shed intolerable long before garbage day. The smell might even seep into the loose boards of the old house. Keeping the garbage there wasn't going to be a permanent solution, he decided, but it was the only outbuilding that had a sturdy latch that had any hope of thwarting determined animals. It would have to do until he built a secure place away from the house.

Peter used an outside spigot to wash his hands and then went to the front

of the church. The gravel parking lot wasn't empty. It contained Petula's blue Buick. The hot ping of the engine told him she had just arrived.

Peter didn't go to exchange pleasantries with Petula. Experience told him she didn't want to come in for a cup of tea, coffee, or orange juice and wouldn't welcome even a *good morning* from him. Her routine included cleaning the church and then going to the small office to do paperwork, make fundraising calls, and plan the events that the church traditionally participated in. Peter left bills and notes about any housekeeping problems she needed to be aware of on the office desk. She ran everything smoothly, quietly, and competently. If her price was to be left alone, Peter was willing to pay it to keep her services.

Petula's presence, even though they didn't interact, always made Peter uncomfortable, so on the Tuesdays and Thursdays when she worked, he usually went into town. Today wasn't an exception. That's why he had dressed in his priest collar, black shirt, and slacks even though it wasn't Sunday. His parishioners wouldn't want to see their priest wearing garden stained shorts and a t-shirt with a faded logo of an old, heavy metal band. He had to look the part of Reverend Strike.

The unattached garage had once been a horse barn in a previous incarnation and needed repairs. The old wood siding, patchy, peeling white paint, and the rusted tin roof seemed poised to collapse on the two cars parked inside. There wasn't a lock because the wooden double doors were weathered so badly they felt fragile enough to snap. When Peter swung them open, their rusty hinges creaked alarmingly.

The hook on the wall inside, holding the keys to the vehicles was a sign of how trusting Reverend Williams had been. Or, perhaps, he hadn't been trusting? It's possible he would have had faith that someone who stole one of his cars needed it. The good Lord provided, but sometimes he provided the needy with Reverend William's property. It made God seem like a socialist. The thought made Peter snicker, but then he quieted. The thought felt particularly

blasphemous wearing a priest's collar.

One of the cars was a lemon yellow Cadillac. It had belonged to William's wife and he had cared for it as lovingly as he had cared for her. Only in the final days before his death, when he had grown weak with heart complications, had he allowed Peter to wax the car and make sure its interior remained pristine. For him it had probably been akin to giving Peter permission to touch his wife. Peter hadn't touched it since Reverend William's death. The smell of Mrs. William's gardenia scented perfume still clung to the interior like a ghost and it made him uneasy. He supposed he would have to sell it, eventually, but for now it was still sacrosanct in his mind.

The old gray 4 door Chrysler sedan sitting next to the Cadillac looked all of its 25 years. Covered in road dust, it had scratches and dents and tires that were going bald. It had a wide back seat, though, and a spacious trunk. Peter had used it to haul building materials for repairs to the church and the house. Though he had abused its shocks by loading it far over its weight capacity several times, it still ran smoothly. Peter, unfortunately, planned to abuse it some more.

Peter felt cowardly as he drove the car out of the garage, closed the barn like doors, and then drove it past the house and the church. Gravel popped from under the car wheels as it negotiated the gravel side drive, announcing his passage. He avoided looking to his left in case Petula heard the noise and was curious enough to look out of one of the windows. Peter's day had started unpleasantly. He didn't want to compound that unpleasantness by being on the receiving end of one of Petula's patented *stink eyes*.

Peter breathed a sigh of relief when he stopped at the end of the drive without encountering her. There wasn't any air conditioning in the car. With the window rolled down, he could hear the cicadas buzzing already in the fields of tall grass and wildflowers as he carefully looked both ways down the highway for traffic. The big rigs usually ignored the speed limit and often came at top speed from a part of the highway hidden between low hills and tall

pinetrees.

Something big and hairy jumped through the rolled down passenger side window and landed in the seat with a squeak of springs and the sound of compressed plastic. Peter cried out and threw himself against the driver's side door, hitting his shoulder painfully. His arms flailed and hit controls as he raised them to fend off a possible bear attack, accidentally sounding the horn and turning on the windshield wipers in the process. The world was a momentary blur as he panicked to the sound of wiper blades dragging and squeaking against a dry windshield.

When Peter didn't feel a bear taking him into its deadly embrace in order to kill him with teeth or claws, he lowered his arms and blinked stupidly at his new passenger as his heart hammered painfully in his chest. Loco sat in the passenger seat.

Peter said one word, explosively. "Fuck!"

The dog twitched at the expletive but didn't abandon the car. He looked at Peter curiously with his blue eyes and head slightly cocked to one side. His cinnamon freckles, mask, and tipped ears made him look exotic. He panted and Peter smelled the scraps on his breath. He had taken Peter's offering and now... what? He wanted a ride to town? He had attached himself to Peter? He liked car rides? The last seemed the most likely. Perhaps he had been dumped along the highway by someone and assumed a car would take him back to his home?

Peter turned off the wipers. They'd left half circle marks on the glass. He pointed to the open passenger side window sternly. "I appreciate your offer of friendship, but you picked the wrong time. I have work to do. You can't come. I need you to get out of the car."

The burs in the filthy dog's fur had multiplied since Peter had seen him last. He also stunk of more than table scraps. He smelled as if he had rolled on something that had been deceased for several days. His tail wagged a little and his eyes were round, moist, and huge. They were eyes probably developed by

thousands of years of natural selection to turn a human's heart into mush and to manipulate him. Peter almost succumbed, but then an eighteen wheeler chose that moment to roar by them so fast it rocked the Chrysler. Gravel flew and peppered the sedan's grill and hood.

Peter's eyes followed the rig in shock. The rig had a bumper sticker on the back that included a phone number. It read, *how's my driving? Call 1-800- I don't give a shit*. The pounding vibration of country music on the rig's stereo bass speaker, turned to its highest setting, battled the sound of the rig's engine for supremacy as it continued down the road without slowing. If Peter had pulled out earlier—He looked at the dog with his heart in his throat. It was possible the dog's impromptu appearance had saved his life.

“Thanks.”

Peter and the dog stared at each other for a long minute as Peter rejoiced in his continued existence. Peter didn't believe in magical dogs that could tell the future and save people's lives, though, and the stink in the car was getting markedly worse. Eventually, he recovered enough to renew his demand. Still, he felt bad for insisting, “Get out, now!”

The dog made a grumbling sound and his ears went flat. He obeyed, though, leaping out of the window as lightly as he had leapt in. Peter made sure the dog wasn't near the wheels before he cautiously pulled the car onto the highway. In his rearview mirror, Peter could see Loco staring after him. The dog then loped across the highway and into the tall grass.

Peter told himself he should be glad things had ended that way. A guilty voice inside him pointed out that he could have taken the dog into town and asked the vet to check him for an identification chip. Most dogs had them now. Peter told that voice to stop being naïve and grow up. Finding the owners, who had most likely dumped the dog, and forcing them to take the dog back, might be a sure way to sign the dog's death warrant. Loco was better off roaming the wilds and eating scraps for his meals than getting euthanized in an animal shelter.

Peter recognized his major failing the same way a drunk recognized his craving for alcohol. He had lived his life up until then with the attitude that when he wanted something he was going to get it no matter the consequences. Most people who broke the law had no control over their need for instant self-gratification. Peter was no exception. The list of reasons why he shouldn't make Loco his pet couldn't override the one reason he should; because he wanted him.

Recognizing his old pattern didn't make it any easier for Peter to deny that desire. When he reached town and stopped by Setter's grocery, Peter bought dog food along with his weekly supplies. If Loco held a grudge against him because he had tossed him out of his car, he reasoned, he needed to make it up to Loco with more than table scraps.

Chapter Four

Peter's trip to the Ruthie's Garden Center and hardware emporium after the grocery separated him from the farmers who shopped for their farm supplies at Nedderman's Tractor Supply and Hardware. Peter, firmly in the land of grandmotherly flower beds and hobby farmer's vegetable gardens, liked it that way.

Nedderman's catered to sun-weathered warriors of the farm. They battled Mother Nature each day and were full of tales of their conquests and waterloos. While they were respectful towards him Peter could see their contempt when he sought out How To books and demonstrated his lack of knowledge about wood, hardware, and which pesticide to use to keep carpenter ants from eating his front door jam.

Ruthie's was a sharp contrast. Ruthie, an elderly woman who wore a red gauze shirt with an Indian floral design, a chakra stone necklace, white cotton pants, and leather sandals, made Peter think of India and hippies happily living in the Haight-Ashbury district. Her white hair was styled in a large mound on top of her head and held by numerous pins. She had lively brown eyes and a soft spoken voice in which she conveyed her vast knowledge of everything from when to plant vegetables to the deeper complexities of Robert Frost's poems.

Ruthie's garden center was large and varied, her hardware selection small, but useful, and her Emporium a garden for the mind. The wood floored Emporium had double doors that were always open, rain or shine. It held old books, almanacs, and thick tomes on home improvement. The building also contained home décor, decorative garden accessories, balms, soaps, and sachets, and a music section devoted to orchestral, new age, and easy listening. Tucked in amongst those sections was a collection of items for sale that could have easily come from the attic of an artistically inclined eclectic and eccentric grandmother. Canvases, wall hangings, pots, mugs, and even

small café tables were decorated with colorful mosaic, stained glass, woven hemp, and native designs.

Peter wasn't drawn to Ruthie's by her odd inventory, though, but because she didn't judge a man who, less than a year ago, hadn't known which end of a hammer to hold. Back then, his knowledge had consisted of how best to break into a place, hotwire a car, avoid pissing off gangs, and to survive in prison. Ruthie's expert advice had quickly made Peter invaluable to the sickly Reverend Williams. He owed her, so when she spent a long time picking apart Tennyson while she rang up his mulch, flowers, shrubs, and ant killer, he was all ears. He needed Nedderman's for wood and roofing hammers, but he needed Ruthie's gently delivered advice when it came to everything else.

"You're planting flowers?" Ruthie sounded excited as she looked into his wooden pull cart full of plants and soaker hoses. "Rebecca Williams used to love filling the church flower beds. They were a treat to see when I drove past going to Marbury."

Marbury was the equivalent of going into the big city. If a person needed more than a small clinic doctor, wanted to shop at a huge chain grocery or megamall, or yearned for big city entertainments, they went to Marbury. To Peter, after having lived in New York City, it seemed a postage stamp sized city.

"Did I pick the right kinds of flowers?" he asked her with a shy smile.

She frowned at the flowers, her old wrinkled hands checking them for pests and damaged leaves. She finally nodded in approval and smiled back at him. "Perfect. Make sure you buy a good fertilizer and prepare the soil. Don't plant them too deep. Consider a greenhouse, of course, but if you won't, you'll have these to brighten up the place for a good four months before the first snowfall."

This was ski country. The locals measured almost everything by the arrival of the first snowfall.

"Lavender needs well-drained, slightly alkaline soil with a pH between 6.7

and 7.3,” Ruthie instructed him. “You can add builder's sand to the soil before planting to increase drainage, which is vital because lavender will not tolerate excessive soil moisture or humidity. I sell kits to check the soil. Salvia grows well without much help. Monardella needs 5.0 to 7.0 ph. Consider putting them in a separate planter. Some pink or yellow roses would look lovely among the reds and purples. I have a yellow variety with orange centers. When they bloom they look exquisite. Using border plants also gives a planter a nice professional look. I suggest some gold mound spirea or some purple diamond loropetalum.”

An excellent salesperson, Ruthie led Peter up and down the aisles of plants and helped him fill three more carts full of flowers and border plants. She chatted the entire time and it wasn't always about Tennyson. Peter didn't reveal his ignorance about the collected works of any poet. He wasn't a book reader. When he had been too young to understand that life had given him the short end of the stick, he had dreamed of being an artist. That's why he started in surprise when she began interjecting into her plant discussion her opinion about which flower arrangements were best for painting. It was as if she could see that long lost dream still peeking hopefully out of his sooty heart.

“I have an art section in the Emporium,” she said at last as she picked up a potted white and purple petunia but then put it back as if it didn't meet her standards. “I don't just sell things to fill planters. I also sell things for the soul.”

“How did you...” Peter left his sentence unfinished because he wasn't sure how to ask if she read minds.

“You have an artist's hands,” she said as she turned and smiled at him, “long, sensitive fingers. Am I right?”

Peter glanced down at his long fingers. He felt embarrassed about them. “I thought about being an artist a long time ago,” he replied as he curled his fingers so she couldn't see them anymore. He almost added, *but life got real and I grew up*, but lucky for him those words never left his lips. Ruthie was

speaking before he could utter them.

“You decided to be a priest like your father instead: a higher calling?”

Before he died, the real Strike had talked nonstop about being a priest and how it had been his calling. When he had found out from his mother that his estranged father shared that calling, it had been the best day of his life.

Peter almost had a flashback to that night. He could hear and feel the cold rain, the flash of lightning, and a stiff breeze off the ocean. The pounding of the surf had been a backdrop to his conversation with the young priest that had taken refuge with him under the brown fronds of a beach bar tiki hut that had been shuttered for the night. Two men had walked the beach to contemplate their lives before embarking on momentous decisions. Only one man had left it alive. The other had died a hero.

“Nothings says you can’t do both,” Ruthie said firmly. Her blue eyes were kind. It took him a beat to remember what they were talking about; art.

“Maybe later,” he hedged, “after I get the repairs to the church and house completed.”

“Time is a thief,” Ruthie intoned, as if she were quoting from something.

A tall willowy brunette in a yellow sun dress muttered sourly as she passed them, “More than time is a thief, it seems.”

Danica Carmichael, one of Peter’s parishioners, pulled a cart holding laurel saplings. Laurel trees lined the town’s main street and every home owner seemed to own a few as well. If he was correct in thinking that Danica was accusing him of misusing church funds buying flowers, she was equally guilty of misusing her money to purchase something the town had an overabundance of.

Ruthie frowned after Danica, but judiciously waited until she had rounded a bend of tall potted box myrtle before saying, “If your lenses are dirty, you can only see filth.”

Danica always had a sour word for everyone and everything. Peter doubted she enjoyed life unless she was making someone miserable.

“The Lord will help her find her way,” he replied, even though he thought the Devil was going to eventually have her company. He needed to stay in character.

Peter didn't believe Ruthie was a Christian. She gave him a doubtful look. He could easily imagine her meditating to Tibetan singing bowls and chanting a mantra. She had an aura of a new age disciple, or at least her patchouli perfume made her smell like one.

“I suppose,” she said neutrally and shrugged as she led him back to her cash register. “Don't let him rattle you, though,” she continued as she began ringing up his purchases. “I'm sure your flock will appreciate your hard work, and the funds spent, making the church beautiful.”

Danica had made him uncertain about that, but Ruthie gave Peter renewed confidence.

Behind Ruthie's register hung a pegboard holding the pinned business cards of local landscapers, people who mowed lawns, and handymen. To one side of those were a few handmade and printed lost and found signs. The friendly face of a found pink and black spotted pig vied for space with a lost goat and a lost golden retriever.

“Nice pig,” he said jokingly.

She chuckled. “The Andrews found him. Their little son, Greg, loves that pig and doesn't really want to find the owner. State law says a found animal has to be posted for thirty days before someone can legally claim them, though. Most animals have chips, so finding the owners is easy. Pigs don't as a rule.”

Loco probably had a chip. Peter could imagine a child, like Greg, missing him.

“May I make a sign? I saw a dog running loose near the church.”

“Of course you can.” Ruthie gave him a blank sheet of paper and the stub of an abused pencil. There were teeth marks on it. Feeling those marks made him uncomfortable as he wrote a description of the dog and the word found at the top of the paper. He wondered if Ruthie had been the pencil chewer or one

of her helpers.

When he finished, Ruthie took the paper, read his description with interest, and then pinned the paper under the pig.

Peter nodded to his paper fluttering in a slight breeze now. "How long will you keep that up?"

"Thirty days." Ruthie winked at him and smiled. "After that, I date the signs and put them in a file. I have some lost and founds that are years old, so if the police ask about whether you posted an ad about your lost dog, you can send them to me."

After thirty days he legally owned the dog. She was assuring him that she would back up his claim.

Peter had been told that lying to oneself is something many criminals do. They like to justify their crimes to make themselves feel better. If someone is a bad person, or has lots of money already, it's easier on the conscience to steal from them. When Peter had stretched that logic to include the theft of items from the unlocked van of a paraplegic, the lie he had told himself to make himself feel better had reached an entirely new level of mental gymnastics. A bumper sticker on the van, advertising a political view he had found distasteful at the time, had given him mental cart Blanche. This time, it was Ruthie who offered to give him his mental band aid. The new Peter, the fake Peter Strike, didn't steal from handicapped people anymore and he didn't look for the owners of a dog half-heartedly so he could be sure to get custody of him.

"I'll also post a notice in the vet's office and at the animal shelter," Peter told her, even though the kid in him, who wanted a dog, didn't want to do any such thing. "I want to make sure the dog gets back to his family."

Ruthie looked guilty now and quickly replied, as if she hadn't just suggested that he was going through the motions for legal reasons, "Of course, Reverend, everyone takes their animals to Dr. Thomas Kind. If someone knows the dog, it's a good chance they will see your notice in his office."

“I hope so.”

They finished on a pleasant note, because a little later, as if to redeem herself, Ruthie tucked in a wrapped canvas and a small starter set of acrylic paints and brushes among his purchases as Peter loaded his car.

“Some food for the soul,” she said and nothing more as she waved away his protests. The gift could be thought of as kind, or good business, depending on how cynically he chose to view it. Like a drug dealer who gave away free samples to addict their clients, getting him addicted to painting would certainly help her revenue stream. Artist supplies were expensive. Deep down, though, Peter wanted to think she was just being kind.

When he finally left the garden center, Peter had every nook and cranny of his car filled with mulch, fertilizer, and plants. He barely had enough room to squeeze into the driver’s seat. The colorful roses were clustered next to him in the passenger seat, their thorns catching at his shirt sleeve and painfully pricking at his skin as he turned the car out of the garden center parking lot and drove to his next stop.

Windham used to be name Kiwidinok. At some point in the city’s history, a marketer decided that name screamed backwoods hunting camp and not wealthy tourist destination. A city council desperate for revenue, and faced with shuttered businesses and fleeing citizenry, had agreed unanimously. There were still people who called it by the nickname Kiwi, and referred to themselves as Kiwis. Even one of the baseball teams was name Kiwi and proudly displayed banners with the kiwi bird in their emblem. One of his eldest parishioner’s once told Peter that Kiwidinok meant *one with the wind*, or something close to it. The name, of course, had nothing to do with the Kiwi bird, but at the time of choosing a mascot, an emblem of wind might have seemed harder to depict than a kiwi bird to the then principal of the renamed Windham Elementary school. Whether the name change had improved the fortune of the city, or the construction of a new airport in the nearby city of Marbury, was still a bone of contention.

For a city that had been desperate enough to change its name to escape the label of backwoods hunting camp, it seemed determined to make the main street look like something out of the wilds of Alaska. Peter had heard the term *theme park version* when describing that main street and he had to agree. If a giant mouse in a coonskin cap and wearing buckskin clothing with frills had suddenly appeared to greet newcomers it would have seemed normal. It was a safe, packaged, version that any wealthy tourist could feel comfortable in. Maybe the local general store had a wooden porch and wooden barrels inside for décor, but it also sold \$100.00 wine in a temperature controlled cooler and filet mignon in a top of the line meat case that had been cut by an expert butcher.

Pop's was a western style saloon complete with swinging front doors. It had the prerequisite wooden front porch with a fake post to tie up a horse. The roof was made of pre-rusted tin and had lanterns with bulbs imitating flickering gaslight hanging from the porch eaves. The logo hanging on a wooden sign was a stylized version of Pops, as if the letters were exploding. Those exploding letters were surrounded by sticks of dynamite with their wicks alight and sparking. It alluded to the dynamite used by gold miners, but there had never been any gold, or miners, in or around Windham. Soft music came from the bar even that early in the day. They played a bland mix of country and country pop. In a vain attempt at variety to entice anyone with a pulse to spend their money there, they also had a jazz night. Peter liked jazz, but the image of a jazz band playing surrounded by that décor felt so jarring he couldn't imagine a serious jazz enthusiast attending, including him.

Jackson Outfitters had elk horns nailed to their front façade. Peter had never seen elk face to face, but the horns made him realize just how large and formidable they must be. Jackson's, as well as the Pinkerton Lodge, Windham souvenirs, and High Country Clothier were all trying for an Alaskan village theme. They had Inuit designs carved in wood, native looking canoes displayed in various ways, and fake animal pelts stretched over walls or draped over

counters.

Only two places bucked the Great Outdoors themed street. Valkyrie Motorcycles was as biker oriented as one might expect. Their sign: a well-endowed Valkyrie revving up a huge black and chrome motorcycle. The other was Areala Fine Dining, a champagne glass and white tablecloth restaurant with a hardcore New York City front façade of black and chrome. The term for these establishments, often said with distaste, or pride, depending on who you were speaking to, was *Grandfathered In*. They had been built before the council mandated theme. While the other establishments had been happy to take the city's funds to change their storefronts and décor, no amount of petitions and council motions could legally make those two diehards conform.

Personally, Peter thought those businesses made the street look more interesting, but he seemed in the minority.

Peter pulled into his next destination, Two Birds Coffee Shop. Maybe he should have included it in his list of businesses that weren't interested in a theme park style main street, but their decor was traditional for the area with local tribal totem poles, depicting colorful, stylized animals, as posts for their porch. Instead of being bland and non-threatening to a rich tourist's sensibilities, though, their real rustic decor probably deflected them like a force field.

The dust and signs of age in the business were real. The owner's mangy white and black spotted cat licked his ass on the wooden coffee bar and had scars and an ear missing from numerous cat fights. Old man Two Birds, part of an offshoot tribe of the Chinook, sat on a real nail barrel and chain smoked clove cigarettes despite all city ordinances, and didn't mind farting loudly. The bear pelt on the wall behind the wooden bar was real. Two Birds liked to say he had killed it, but his hunting story changed every time he told it. His granddaughter, BD, a dour faced woman with a spiky punk hair style dyed pink and blue, always dressed in men's western clothing and oversized, unlaced hiking boots. She served coffee and tea with an angry squint and her

patented, *I don't give a fuck about you*, attitude. Peter supposed that if her nickname stood for Blind Deer, he might look at the world with a piss eye too. It might have sounded better in her native language, but Grandfather Two Birds never used it. It made Peter wonder if they had bowed to the fact that most people couldn't pronounce it, were too lazy to, or worse, that they no longer spoke their native tongue. Still, Peter could find fault with a mother who named her daughter Blind Deer, especially when her name was Shooting Star. A more cynical part of him wondered if their real names were Linda, Gus, and Sarah, and they only used native sounding names for marketing reasons.

Marketing reasons were also why they changed their general store into a Native American coffee bar, but Peter suspected that competition from the larger and better stocked outfitter had decided their change of merchandise. They still carried smoked and dried fish, deer jerky, some fishing equipment, and had their own line of t-shirts with Native American designs. Those shirts hung along a chain suspended from the ceiling. As for the coffee and tea, Two Birds' wife was an herbalist. The coffee might be strong enough to eat a spoon stirred in it, but she infused that and the teas with her own herbs and spices. Peter loved the combinations and it kept him coming back. That combination of coffee and local herbs and spices also drew in some of the tourists despite the shop's appearance. Two Birds managed to stay in the black in their accounting, but Peter always felt he was doing his part to keep them in business when he bought coffee there.

Parking was limited to a little dirt lot behind the bar, but Peter didn't use it. A child of the city, he still hadn't accustomed himself to the way people left their things out and their doors unlocked as if the concept of stealing hadn't reached their small city yet. The Dao might have changed some of that, but a red Ducati with a red helmet left on the seat was the first sight that greeted him when he pulled his plant filled car up to the curb and parked in front of the coffee bar.

The windows of the coffee bar were dirty, but Peter could still watch his car

and its contents while he drank his coffee. The Ducati, further down the street and not in view of the windows, could have its helmet, or the entire motorcycle, stolen in seconds.

White Tail, who insisted on calling himself Jimmy for reasons Peter didn't know, was the young son of BD. Perched on a nail barrel outside of the coffee bar. He wore a pair of jean shorts, a blue tank top, and cowboy boots. His hair, jet black and tied in two long braids, and his features were clearly Native American. Holding a tray with little paper cups filled with coffee, he looked as sour faced as his mother. Peter couldn't blame him. There were a lot better things he could think of a child doing than holding a tray of hot coffee on a hot day during summer break from school. He did have an important job though. It had been Jimmy who had first hooked Peter on his grandmother's coffee blends. At the time, Peter had been fresh from a world of concrete, steel, and diligent health inspectors. The dirt caked door mat at the entrance would have been an insurmountable barrier to him without some enticement.

"Good way of hiding your stash," Jimmy said as Peter walked past him and opened the front door of the coffee bar. Jimmy nodded to Peter's car. Branches and flowers were sticking out of every window as if they were waving at people passing by. "It's harder for a cop dog to sniff out if you have that stink covering up the smell of weed."

Peter looked clueless as he paused and stared at Jimmy. "I don't grow weed."

Jimmy took his declaration as the truth, but then asked bluntly, as if it speaking about the same subject, "Are you gay?"

"No."

"Why buy flowers then?"

"They're for the church grounds."

"Guess that's what you do when you don't do women."

Peter stared, dumbfounded, but then pointed out, "I'm not catholic."

"What's that got to do with it?" Jimmy seemed genuinely mystified.

Peter wasn't going to get pulled into a conversation about sex and the clergy with a child or continue to tell lies. "Google it," he suggested and continued into the shop.

Peter was immediately enveloped by the smell of coffee, tea, clove cigarettes, and something slightly dusty and preserved in formaldehyde. That might have been the bear skin on the wall. Native American flutes were softly playing over a sound system, though Peter felt sure BD would have preferred something a lot more edgy. He walked around the t-shirts hanging from a chain and sat on one of the nail barrel seats in front of the wooden coffee bar.

Two Birds sat on his barrel as if he never moved. His rugged features showed every one of his 85 years. He didn't have wrinkles, he had ravines that cut into the dark leather he had for skin. His hair, white and cut military short on top, still retained a long braid in the back. A cup of coffee sat by him on another barrel and the black and white cat rubbed itself along his thin naked legs. He was wearing tan cargo shorts, large white tennis shoes with thick soles, and one of the bar's black t-shirts decorated with a colorful bear totem. He held the clove cigarette between thumb and forefinger, poised as if he had just taken a puff. His head was wreathed with smoke. He gave Peter a thoughtful look with dark eyes deeply nested in the wrinkles around his eyes.

"Just ask," BD urged her grandfather irritably as she wiped off the bar with a rag and nodded at Peter.

Two Birds puffed his cigarette several times and then let out a large stream of smoke. It enveloped Peter and the smell of clove vied with the rich smell of fresh brewed coffee. "We heard you were visited by the Sheriff this morning. We wondered why."

Peter couldn't tell if Two Birds asked because he was concerned about Peter, or just satisfying their curiosity. He wondered how they knew. Had someone seen Padilla at the church or had they overheard the Sheriff tell someone his destination?

Peter didn't try to obfuscate. Two Birds and his family weren't malicious

just blunt, as if it never occurred to them that some things were none of their business. Maybe drinking at their bar meant Peter was extended family now and owed them an explanation? “A member of the Dao is missing,” Peter explained. “He came to my Sunday service before he disappeared. Sheriff Padilla wanted to know if he had talked with me or anyone else at the church service.”

“Suicide maybe,” BD mused as she poured Peter’s favorite cup of coffee into a big brown mug without his asking and put it on the bar in front of him. “He didn’t find comfort in your service so he went and offed himself.”

Peter had picked up his mug, filled with blackberry and herb infused coffee, and was inhaling the rich aroma appreciatively, when she said this. Despite the heat of the brown ceramic mug, he felt a chill. An image of Jeffie walking across a field of tall grass and wild flowers came to his mind’s eye. He tried to see a despondent man in that image and came up short. One of his hands had been out and touching the flowers as he passed them. He had tossed back his long hair and raised his head to admire the mountains in the distance. Peter wished he had seen his face. Perhaps Peter was a fake priest, but that didn’t mean he wasn’t human enough to wonder if he could have helped Jeffie somehow.

“I don’t think so,” he said and sipped at his coffee. The rich, fruity taste only hinted at the herbs. “He didn’t seem upset.”

“I’m done with the work!” It was a stranger’s voice coming from a back hallway. He had a slight British accent that seemed more of an affectation, rather than a real one. “Thank you, Love!”

BD and Two Bird’s didn’t acknowledge the voice and the man didn’t appear. Peter heard the squeak and slam of a back door opening and closing.

“A hunter may have shot him and covered up the body,” Two Birds suggested from his pungent, clove scented smokescreen. “It’s happened before.”

BD frowned, “Eight years ago, Grand Dad.”

“That long?” he mused and became distant, as if now remembering other things that might have happened eight years ago.

“Besides, it’s not hunting season,” she reminded him.

He came back to himself to defend his theory. “Laws don’t stop some people.” He shrugged his thin shoulders and said, “More likely he fell into a cave or a ravine.”

“Or the Rev killed and buried him,” BD countered. Her eyes were bright with excitement, enjoying the mystery. It was a facet of her personality Peter had never seen before. He couldn’t imagine BD indulging in mystery novels or binge watching television shows featuring the exploits of old ladies who solved mysteries in-between drinking tea and gardening, yet her fascination with the mystery was obvious.

BD and Two Birds were both looking at Peter appraisingly. He glared back at them. She had just suggested he might be a murderer as easily as if she had asked if he wanted cream or sugar in his coffee.

“Don’t be disrespectful of the dead,” he told them sternly without mounting a defense of his character. He didn’t think he needed to.

Two Birds snorted derisively and said, “The Reverend is a little shifty, but he’s not a killer. He has the spirit of a coyote; opportunistic. The coyote runs when he’s faced with danger. He doesn’t attack like a wolf or a cougar.”

Peter understood that he had just been called a coward, but it was better than being suspected of murder. He finished his coffee fast enough to slightly burn his tongue and then stood up. As he pulled money from his wallet to pay his bill, DB was rolling her eyes as she took Peter’s mug and began sketchily cleaning it.

“He’s doesn’t have a coyote spirit,” BD replied. “More like a ferret, or a field mouse.”

It sounded insulting. Peter muttered, as he turned to leave, “Yours must be a hornet.”

Something flickered in the corner of Peter’s eye; a brief image of red, sun

sparkling on gold, and figures passing by the bar window. They were gone before Peter could turn his head to look. His mind decided one of those figures was Wynd.

Peter thought he said goodbye to BD and Two Birds, but he couldn't swear to it. As a motorcycle engine revved and roared to life, Peter rushed out of the shop and onto the porch, but the motorcycle was already gone. Peter looked both ways down the street in consternation. The light traffic couldn't hide a red Ducati. It must have gone down a side street.

Peter turned his head to ask Jimmy where the motorcycle had gone, but the boy was AWOL. His tray of small coffee filled paper cups sat on the nail barrel.

Looking at the street again in frustration, Peter kept standing there as if the Ducati might suddenly reappear. After a few long moments, though, his mind started thinking about what he must look like and how he might be drawing attention to himself. He couldn't afford to look unhinged, or obsessed with someone from the Dao, even though, deep down, he began to suspect he *was* obsessed with Wynd. He couldn't deny that his trip into town had included the hope that he might see him again.

"Something wrong, Padre?"

Peter turned and came face to face with a female officer whose name badge read Stanwyck. Dressed in a green polyester uniform, it seemed molded to her physically fit body. She made Peter think of a tigress among placid sheep. Even Padilla was a clover munching ram compared to her. With slicked back, very short black hair and mirrored sunglasses, and a stern expression and firm jaw, she exuded tension like a taught bowstring. Her hand was on her gun and Peter could tell from her stance that she was ready to pivot and fire it in any direction at a moment's notice. She screamed military. Peter could easily picture her in Iraq doing a fifth tour of duty.

Peter had a moment he liked to term *brain fart*. He actually wondered how she knew he was a priest before his brain kicked in and reminded him he was

in full priestly uniform.

“Padre?”

Her casual term for priest made Peter think of John Wayne movies. He could even hear Wayne in his mind drawling the word. Peter throttled a nervous laugh. She didn't have access to his weird word associations and might wonder about his sanity.

“There was a red Ducati here a moment ago,” he said, sounding calmer than he felt. “I'm a fan. I wanted to ask the owner a few questions about it. I heard him leaving, though, and didn't get here in time to catch him. Did you recognize who owned it?”

Her tightening mouth let Peter know he had said something stupid or annoying, but she dutifully replied, “I saw the owner and the young man with him, but I didn't ID them.”

Peter couldn't help briefly looking up and down the street again before his eyes returned to her. It occurred to him that Stanwyck hadn't been visible when he had rushed out of the coffee bar to hopefully see Wynd. His paranoia assumed she had been hiding and watching him, but then the question begged, why let him see her now? If Sheriff Padilla had ordered Stanwyck to watch him, what did he hope to find out if he believed Peter had killed Jeffie and buried him somewhere? If he suspected Peter of murder, wouldn't he be searching the church grounds with cadaver sniffing dogs?

Another possibility occurred to Peter, that Stanwyck might be watching Two Birds' establishment. Since she now stood in full view of the front window, though, even as dirty as it was, he would also have to assume she was very bad at her job.

That left Wynd as the subject of Stanwyck's surveillance, especially since the officer had made her appearance after Wynd's departure. Considering the participants of the Dao were known for stealing, Stanwyck's interest in Wynd and his companion was understandable. Peter felt relieved he could placate his paranoia, yet he felt concerned for Wynd as well. He could imagine Stanwyck

charging a three year old who stole a piece of candy to the full extent of the law.

“Maybe you could give me a description of the owner?” Peter suggested. He hoped she would also give him a description of Wynd.

“Hippies, probably from that Dao business in the forest,” Stanwyck replied with an air of distaste. “The guy is in his twenties. He had blonde dreads, a blond goatee, and wore a brown leather beaded patch over one eye. The other man was skinny, had red dreads, and was dressed steam punk. You know what that is, right? He was wearing those weird round glasses with the clock gears on the sides. Why do you want a description?”

Too late, Peter realized she was gauging his reaction to her description, perhaps wondering if he knew them. He floundered for a response and didn't have to pretend to be embarrassed. Finally, he replied lamely, “Just curious, I guess. It's not every day I see a Ducati. I was hoping someone famous owned it.”

She frowned sharply. “You're better off steering clear of them, Padre. A lot of these Dao hippies are homeless people with extensive records. The Ducati could be stolen, or owned by a drug dealer selling to the Dao.”

“Is that why you were watching them, because you think they're drug dealers?”

She nodded, not looking bothered that he had guessed she was surveilling them. “I've been watching the owner of the Ducati since he came into town. The other man seemed to know him. I'm going to run the plate on the Ducati to see what shakes out of the tree.”

“Do you recognize their descriptions?”

When he asked that question, Peter's heart skipped a beat and his paranoia kicked into high gear again. Did Stanwyck know that Wynd had visited him? Had the truck driver told someone in town that he had picked Wynd up from the driveway of a church and that an anxious priest had been there to see him off? Did she now think he was involved in selling drugs as well as being

suspected of murder? His mind was like a bird beating its wings frantically against the bars of a too small cage as he tried to think clearly. He couldn't see a downside to telling the truth, though. If she knew the facts, already, he would only make himself a greater suspect if he was caught lying.

"A young man matching your description came to my church in search of that missing Dao member," he replied. "He called himself Wynd. He told me he was going into town to look for the missing man, though he suspected he might have hooked up with someone and taken off completely."

Stanwyck didn't have to voice the fact it looked suspicious that Peter happened to be there at the exact time as Wynd. To re-direct her attention, Peter decided to stop focusing the conversation solely on Wynd.

"It's a shame people like that have a Ducati," he said with fake concern. "They're probably not taking care of it." He raised his eyebrows as if in alarm and asked anxiously, "Do you think they stole it?"

His paranoia went up a notch when she didn't change expression. The thought of a stolen motorcycle didn't concern her or shift her focus from him. She did reply flatly as she stared at him with eyes that reminded Peter of reptiles, "It's possible."

"There's too much sin in the world." Peter sighed as if the weight of the world rested on his shoulders. He let his words hang in the air for a moment and then gave her a brittle smile as he continued, "Which is why I better get back to work saving sinners, officer."

Peter felt her judging every atom of his being in a slow once over and then she released him from her cold stare. "Afternoon Padre."

"Good afternoon Officer."

She watched Peter, unmoving, as he left the porch of Two Bird's bar and climbed into his car. He fended off the sharp pricks of the roses in the front seat as he pulled away from the curb. In his rear view mirror, Peter saw her watching him until he couldn't see her any longer.

The thought of people in the town, the countryside, and even lone truckers

as citizen police officers, always alert and ready to report his every move or act inconsistent with that of a priest, spooked Peter. He tried to scoff at his paranoia, which was far and above his usual level, but he kept glancing in the rearview to look for someone following him as he left Windham.

Constance Madeline Stanwyck watched Peter Strike leave in his old Chrysler filled with plants and had the firm suspicion that he was guilty of something. He had a New York accent that sounded middle class, but acted as wary as a gang member with a pocketful of meth to hide. Sheriff Padilla had already checked him out thoroughly, though, and aside from parking tickets that had been dutifully paid on time, the man didn't have any priors. Stanwyck hated inconsistencies as much as she hated her first name. They were like hidden landmines. They could unexpectedly derail an entire operation or kill good soldiers both metaphorically and physically. She couldn't afford a cockup at this stage of the game.

Stanwyck stepped off the porch of the coffee bar and slipped between buildings. The alley was narrow, but the buildings, despite their wood facades, were cinder block. The wall of the coffee bar was clean, but the adjoining building had some graffiti spray painted on it. Someone named Bigbang had a high opinion of his nickname. He had written it in blue and white letters four feet tall with the words ... *with a whimper* underneath. There were many such tags in town. Stanwyck had already investigated them and found the artist, a local conspiracy theorist with a podcast. He believed the government was implementing a plan to kill its own citizens to reduce the population via chemtrails, tracks left by aircraft in the sky, and slow poisons in the water system. His reasons for a government sanctioned holocaust were varied. Stanwyck had judged him harmless and his influence limited by a pathetically small audience.

Stanwyck took out her cell and texted a message without any keywords

that might alert a homeland security algorithm. *Pick up some pizza* elicited a quick response. *Pepperoni, olives, and anchovies?* Stanwyck deciphered the code hidden in the reply and called the secure number. Her phone seemed to be operating normally, but she knew her phone had been commandeered and searched for piggyback programs and authenticated. When a female voice came on the line Stanwyck felt like a fangirl meeting a teen idol. She never failed to feel jazzed that one of her sex had risen to the top and commanded the entire project. That she should reply to her phone call personally doubled Stanwyck's excitement. Her commander preferred to keep herself in the shadows.

"How's my laundry?"

"In progress," Stanwyck replied.

"The drycleaners is slow. I need my dress suits for an important meeting."

"They've been alerted."

"Abort?"

Stanwyck felt incensed at her commander's lack of trust in her abilities.

"No," she replied firmly. "They'll be done in time."

"Maybe the dress suits should be split up between dry cleaners?"

If she allowed her commander to reduce her quota Stanwyck might lose her lead position. She wanted into the inner sanctum of the operation and to rise in the ranks as high, or higher, than her commander. If she couldn't execute orders that were *cake* then that would never happen. A few troublemakers in town and members of the Dao that had become wary of traveling alone this year weren't going to derail her part of the operation.

"They'll finish in time," Stanwyck insisted. "There's no need to split up the clothes."

A small, brown and gray lizard with one black back leg walked slowly over the cracked concrete, perhaps looking for a spot of sun to warm its cold blood. Its throat sack opened and closed, showing its scarlet color, and it paused to look up at Stanwyck with one bright, round eye. Stanwyck stepped on it and twisted her shiny, black, standard issue uniform shoe for good measure as her

commander threatened, “There will be consequences if they aren’t.”

The line disconnected and Stanwyck immediately called another number as she scraped the bottom of her shoe on the concrete next to the crushed lizard. Frowning angrily as she left red smears on the rough surface, she barely gave Sheriff Padilla time to answer the phone before she barked, “I saw that Dao hippy in town just now. He took off on a motorcycle with Graymonger. I don’t want your excuses. I want results. Pick up the collection pace, or else.”

Padilla said nervously, “He’s a career street fag, always looking over his shoulder for the law. He’ll make a mistake, though, and I’ll bag him.”

That Dao hippy walked the streets as if he owned them, as free as the wind and so sure of his invincibility. Stanwyck had wanted to show him just how weak and vulnerable he was and how much he had been lying to himself. Stanwyck had wanted to see that moment in his young eyes when he lost his innocence. You didn’t get to the top by lying to yourself, she felt. You climbed up, using tooth and nail and ruthlessness. You were only really free when you cleared your world permanently of all your competitors.

Stanwyck had a job to do. She needed to forget the young man and concentrate on filling her quota. Once that was completed, she could find the Dao hippy again and indulge in personal pleasures. Nothing pleased her more than cleansing the world of the ignorant and the weak. Showing them just how ignorant and weak they were before their deaths was whipped cream on a sundae.

“We don’t have time. Forget him,” she said. “Pick new targets.”

Chapter Five

Petula wasn't at the church when Peter returned home. Neither was the dog. One was a relief, the other frustrating.

The gravel in the driveway popped and grated together as he pulled off the highway and drove the car into the garage. The plants were drooping and looking decidedly unhappy about being in the hot car, but Peter took his groceries into the house first and put them away before his frozen food turned into packages of defrosted mush.

After he changed into tan cargo shorts and a white tank top, he finally began taking the plants out of the car and carrying them to the flower beds. The sun broiled the landscape by then as the sun reached its zenith. A heat haze rippled over the fields. Except for the constant sound of traffic on the highway, relative quiet reigned. It was as if the heat had dispirited even the crows and the cicadas.

It wasn't a good time to garden, but Peter felt eager to get his mind off of a certain police officer, who looked more like a soldier, and his fear that she or Sheriff Padilla might arrest him using circumstantial evidence for the murder of Jeffie. His fear wasn't being reasonable, he told himself, but fear often wasn't. He couldn't calm himself down by telling himself that horn dogging over Boho men wasn't a crime.

Peter reminded himself, after he amended the soil in the flower beds with fertilizer and set up the soaker hoses, that Jeffie hadn't been declared dead yet. Peter's more cynical self, that had seen ugly things in the city, didn't indulge in Pollyannaism. For him, Jeffie was dead until he proved that he wasn't.

As Peter worked to arrange the potted plants to his liking in the flower beds, he kept glancing surreptitiously around him. Was he being watched? The tall grass and the far stand of trees on the nearby hill could hide anyone. A drone could be hovering, far enough away to mask its sound, but close enough

to see his every move. He mind even entertained the idea that satellites in space, ones that had lenses powerful enough to count the hairs on his head, might have been deployed to scrutinize his amateur horticultural efforts.

Paranoia could only be maintained for so long, though, in the exhausting heat. Peter eventually accepted his own argument that the only thing making Stanwyck and Padilla suspicious was Peter's nervousness, not hard evidence. Jeffie's case file likely included a note that Reverend Strike had been the last person to see the missing person alive, but Peter had the facts on his side. His entire congregation could swear that he had not followed Jeffie after his departure from his church. Being seen answering Wynd's questions wasn't evidence of wrongdoing either. Understandably, he was a person distraught over his friend's disappearance. He had stopped to question Peter because of the church's proximity to the trail the members of the Dao generally took on their way into town. Stanwyck could now report that Wynd had been seen riding a red Ducati on Windham's streets. Peter hadn't buried him in a flower bed with Jeffie in some sort of perverted sexual killing spree or to enact God's judgment on their supposed sins himself.

Peter couldn't get rid of his paranoia completely, but some was healthy in a person pretending to be someone else. Like a mantra, he reminded himself he was safer being alone. Certainly avoiding entanglements in missing person's cases was even more preferable. While he couldn't ignore his duties as a priest, he could exile himself from Windham in the foreseeable future. If he asked her, Petula would buy his groceries and supplies without complaint.

As he un-potted his plants and buried them in their designated spaces, a colorful palate began to emerge. Peter felt pleasure creating something beautiful and he also experienced an unfamiliar emotion; pride. These emotions remained undimmed even as his hands were soon covered in soil and pricks from the thorns on the roses. His shirt became soaked in his sweat and his knees ached from constant bending and crawling among the plants to position and reposition the soaker hoses. If someone had asked Peter at the

beginning of the year if he could see himself being a priest who loved planting flowers Peter might have laughed before punching him. In his mind, they would have been questioning his masculinity. As he planted the last border plant and then stepped back to admire his work, he didn't feel any less masculine. Gardening wasn't for wimps. It was backbreaking work.

Peter stepped back even further so that the hills and the mountains were the backdrop for his flower beds, a view worthy of a photograph or a painting. He didn't rush to get a camera or the artist supplies Ruthie had graciously donated to him, though. He didn't fool himself into thinking he had talent in either medium. Instead, he tried to capture the sight perfectly in his mind's eye. When Peter had every splash of color memorized, he went in search of a cold beer to celebrate. He knew planting a few flowers successfully wasn't going to redeem a criminal who drank beer, had casual hookups with questionable men, and who stole other people's lives, but he could still enjoy his accomplishment.

That night Peter had a nightmare, as if his sub-conscious wanted to punish him for his hubris in being proud of himself. Whether the stress of the day, the hard work of planting flowers, or the microwaved pre-packaged taco dinner he ate over the kitchen sink added fuel to his imagination, he didn't know, but the nightmare was vivid and it kept him in its clutches for what felt like an eternity. When he finally awoke, drenched in sweat and shaking, he could remember every detail of the real Peter Strike's expression as he coughed blood and gasped for air with lungs riddled with bullet wounds.

The real Peter Strike had told him that he believed God had reasons for everything that happened, good or bad, and that he had a plan in constant motion. The real Peter had made the ultimate choice, the one that had saved a life unworthy of his sacrifice, and he had likely believed that God had put him there to do just that. The man who had taken his place, Hunter Green, knew he wouldn't have made the same sacrifice and he certainly wouldn't have accepted his God given fate.

The fake Peter Strike felt the strong need to leave the house, despite his fear of meeting bears. The murdered man was haunting him, not in reality, but as a heavy pall of guilt that filled every corner of the old building.

Even though he had only spoken with the real Peter for less than a half hour, standing under the shelter of a beach bar overhang while the heaven's poured down rain and added water to the pounding surf on the shore, he had discovered that the son of a priest was the better man. Heaven had surely opened the gates and heralded the real Peter's entrance with trumpets. In Hunter Green's case, a heavenly equivalent of an APB had been put out on *his* soul, a bounty for the demons of hell to collect before the Devil dropped him into a special section of hell, one reserved for a Judas who denied the truth to save his life at the expense of someone else's. When Peter claimed Hunter's name and accepted the death meant for him, Hunter had let him. When the masked thugs had told him to *walk away and you won't get hurt*, Hunter had complied without hesitation, only creeping back when they were long gone and Peter was choking on his last breaths.

The counterfeit Peter took a chair and a hot cup of coffee outside and sat by the half circle of flower beds. He was there when the sun began to rise, beating back a mild chill in the air and creeping up the sides of the mountains with coral colored light. If anyone watched him out there in the darkness, he was sure they had long since nodded off. Deep in his thoughts, he didn't move until the coral light turned to yellow and then to hot white as it filled the sky and slipped into the hills and valleys.

The birds began to sing and the crickets were losing the thread of their chorus. Dawn light sparkled in cobwebs strung among his flowers and he could see them like jeweled nets over the fields. A fox trotted down the gravel driveway and started when it saw him. The fox sniffed the air cautiously and then disappeared into the cover of the tall grass.

The last few sips of Peter's coffee had become cold hours ago. When the crows began to flit over the fields in search of whatever crows ate and to caw

incessantly at each other, Peter tossed the coffee aside and stood up. He felt stiff. With the mug dangling in one hand he did a lazy stretch towards the sunlight as if he was a newborn god energized by the light.

Peter thought of the Dao out there in the forest and his mindset took a sideways step. He stopped thinking of them as a thieving, homeless band of gypsies, or hippies as Stanwyck had called them. From all points of the globe they had come to commune with nature. It was their version of taking a chair into the yard and watching the sun rise. They just chose to do it with an eclectic party that had acrobats, fascinating Boho men and women, and blonde men riding red Ducati in attendance.

As for Jeffie's death, and the deaths in previous years, Peter could imagine killers drawn to the intransient party, knowing many were homeless and would never be missed by anyone except maybe by their fellow Dao-mates. They probably hunted at the borders of the Dao like the fox creeping through the tall grass waiting for a mouse to unwisely wander from its burrow.

Peter stopped that train of thought. It implied the forest had killers among the tree trunks and fern brakes. It was even possible that the killers were citizens of Windham and that he knew them. Peter had a nightmare mental image of Petula creeping through the forest with her kitchen knife and in her Sunday best. That sudden flight of fancy didn't seem as fanciful as Peter would have liked.

With the sun passing through the windows of the house and turning the interior to bright gold, he finally felt the ghost of his guilt over Peter's death had stopped haunting the kitchen like the ghost of Christmas past. He went inside by the kitchen door and put his empty coffee mug into the deep, stainless steel sink.

There but for fortune go I. Whenever he thought about drinking too much, taking the drug dealer who hung out in the bar parking lot up on his deal of two for one meth, or driving a little further past the biker bar and gambling at the casinos in Port Rally, his guilt over Peter's ghost clanked its chains. Those

chains connected them by the debt he owed the real Peter, to live a good life in his name. While the real Peter didn't have relatives to care, and his mother had died from cancer weeks before he met him, he didn't want even a distant cousin to think that the real Peter Strike had gone bad. He might have extended that sentiment to include a biker with no strings attached, but he wasn't a saint.

His legal name, Hunter Green, was as fictional as Peter Strike so he didn't mind losing it. A child of orphanages and, after that, juvenile detention lock-ups, he had long ago disappointed society. Abandoned at birth, finding people to adopt a baby was usually easy. Unfortunately, he had been plagued by colic, a persistent rash on his face, and crying jags that lasted for hours. Dissociative disorder they called it now. Children who are warehoused and given only minimal care and contact often never develop emotionally stable personalities. Aside from naming him after the color printed on a can of green paint, Hunter Green, and tending his basic needs, he wouldn't call the attendants at the orphanage where he had lived warm and fuzzy people. When he began breaking the law and exploring his sexuality, they certainly hadn't fought to keep him.

The rash on his face was gone and he didn't have crying jags anymore, but he still struggled not to give in to his impulse to satisfy all his wants without consideration for the law or the people he relieved of their property. The real Peter's selfless act had taught him about true empathy and caring for his fellow man, but practicing it never came naturally.

He settled down at the kitchen table after making more coffee, toasting bread, frying a piece of ham, and pouring himself a glass of juice. That cold juice, with condensation beading on the glass, enticed him with the smell of freshly squeezed oranges. His news program played on his laptop on the kitchen table, a newscaster telling him the top stories of the day.

Having watched the sun rise over the mountains and now sitting quietly eating breakfast and watching the news, Peter felt at peace. His paranoia

finally retreated and his common sense reasserted itself. He wasn't under investigation. He wasn't a suspect. He wasn't being watched. His disguise was perfect. He needed to reclaim normalcy.

A sharp rap of knuckles on Peter's kitchen door startled him and then Wynd opened it and stepped back into his life.

Peter had a slice of toast poised in the air and he had just taken a bite. As Wynd stood there with an expectant expression, Peter chewed and swallowed, almost choking. A part of him did cartwheels of joy while the rest felt incensed at Wynd's intrusion.

Wynd's steampunk sunglasses were on top of his red dreadlocks and multiple head scarves. His bright green eyes were arresting. Peter had never seen that particular shade before. His hair was still full of beads and feathers. He wore several tank tops of various tie dye colors and leotards that were so tight they looked like a second skin. He still wore his big hiking boots and all his jewelry. A new addition hung around his neck, a leather necklace with a bear totem carved in purple stone with a white feather attached to its back.

"You are supposed to wait until I answer the door," Peter told him angrily.

Wynd raised red eyebrows in surprise and replied, "I thought the church was always open to everyone."

"This is my home, not the church."

They faced off after those sentences, frozen for a few moments as if waiting to see who blinked first. Peter found himself putting down his toast and wiping his mouth with a napkin. He guessed that made him the loser.

"All right," Peter finally said, "let's assume I answered the door and asked you to come in. We'll ignore why I made such a bad decision."

"A bad decision? Why?"

"A young man from the Dao was just seen going into the local priest's home at an ungodly hour of the morning. It's bad optics."

"We can go to the church if it makes you cooler about this."

"It's a little late now. Have a seat. Want some breakfast?"

“Coffee and toast is good,” Wynd said as he pulled a chair away from the table and sat down.

The chair scraped the floor loudly. It made Peter think about how long it had been since anyone beside him and Reverend Williams had sat at that table. They had both led lonely lives.

Peter rose to make toast and pour Wynd coffee.

“Do you have cinnamon and sugar?” Wynd asked hopefully. “I love it on buttered toast.”

Peter paused, frowned at Wynd’s boldness, and then began rummaging through a spice drawer for the cinnamon. He found it just as his toast popped up from the toaster. Bringing Wynd’s plate of toast, the bottle of cinnamon, and his coffee to the table Peter put them down in front of him. He nodded to the butter and sugar already on the table as he sat down.

“Thanks.” Wynd began assembling his cinnamon sugar toast with obvious relish. The rings on his hands flashed in the light as he buttered the toast with competent strokes of the butter knife.

“Did you find your friend?” Peter asked and sipped at his juice.

Wynd looked saddened as he sprinkled cinnamon from the spice container over his toast. “No,” he replied. “I asked about him in town, but no one had seen him recently. They were dicks.”

“Sheriff Padilla came here to ask about him yesterday,” Peter informed him. “He took you seriously.”

Wynd frowned as he picked up a small sugar shaker and sprinkled sugar on top of his cinnamon toast. “I didn’t talk to the police. They don’t like the Dao.”

Peter’s heart skipped a beat and he felt a cold sweat spring up on his skin. His paranoia had new proof to justify its existence.

“Someone filed a report,” Peter persisted, wanting a logical explanation that didn’t include him.

“Not me.”

Peter tried to calm himself with common sense. Padilla had said that Tavis Crowley had personally asked him to investigate Jeffie's disappearance, so a report must have been filed by someone. Peter could understand why. Missing and supposedly murdered people, even people from the Dao, were bad for tourism. Crowley would want a proper, short investigation, and a report filed with a case closed stamp before the day was over. Peter soothed his paranoia by arguing that Padilla wouldn't want a suspect, just a witness that saw Jeffie leaving so he could put in his report that Jeffie had left his jurisdiction.

"Maybe someone else from the Dao reported him missing?" Peter suggested.

"It's possible." Wynd put the sugar down and then looked at the table closely. He picked up his toast as if saving it from danger. "You have sugar ants."

Peter looked closely at the table and saw their tiny bodies marching in a line towards his sugar container. He picked up the container. A flip lid had kept the ants from getting inside, but a few were near the lid and still attempting to gain access. He flicked them off with his finger and then brushed the other ants off the table with the back of his hand before putting the container down again.

Wynd ate his toast with appreciative sounds, taking sips of his coffee between bites. Peter drank his juice and waited impatiently for him to finish and tell him why he had come to see him. He tried not to stare as Wynd licked his slender fingers with erotic care.

The news still played on Peter's laptop, the sound low enough not to be a distraction. Still, Peter turned it on mute and pushed it away from him. He let his attention wander between a news reporter, who was now doing an unintentional mime act, and Wynd. Because of that Wynd surprised him when he suddenly stood up, his chair scraping the floor loudly again.

Wynd wiped at his lips with a napkin and then let the napkin drop onto his plate. He slid his steampunk sunglasses over his eyes, an intentional barrier

between them, and backed towards the door. His lips were smiling tightly and his expression dared Peter to criticize him.

“You take a lot of chances,” Peter said sourly. He didn’t get up from his seat. He didn’t want to seem threatening and he had a large erection. It was failing fast in the face of Wynd’s obvious freeloading, though.

“I decided you were a nice guy last time we met,” Wynd replied as he backed to the door and reached behind him to put his hand on the knob. “When I walked by and smelled your breakfast I thought, he’s the kind of guy who’ll share. I was right.”

“You’re going to be wrong one day.”

“Not today.”

Peter sighed and accepted that he had been duped. Wynd wasn’t there to see him or to impart some important message. Breakfast had been his only aim.

“You’re going back to the Dao?” Peter asked.

Wynd nodded as he opened the door, still facing Peter. Though he had just proclaimed Peter a nice guy, he still acted cautious. It told Peter a lot about Wynd. He wasn’t a fool. He had climbed into the cab of a strange truck driver, though, a person who had exuded lecherous vibes like a shark surrounded by the blood of its prey. Now, that seemed out of character for him. Peter began to entertain the idea Wynd might be armed and dangerous.

“What happened to the guy on the red Ducati?” Peter wondered.

Wynd blinked in surprise at his knowledge.

“I thought I saw you when I was at the coffee bar yesterday,” Peter explained.

Wynd shrugged. “Graymonger wanted more than I wanted to give last night, so I dumped him and found a place to sleep on my own. He wasn’t around this morning to give me a ride back to the Dao.”

“His name is Graymonger?”

“People in the Dao like their anonymity.”

“Did he try to force you?” Peter couldn’t help feeling outrage at the thought of a guy with blond dreads and an eyepatch putting his hands on Wynd.

Wynd cocked his head sideways a little as he regarded Peter. “I wasn’t in the mood yesterday. Another day I might be.”

“He’s your boyfriend, then?”

“No.”

“Oh.”

Peter knew Wynd could see his relief in his expression. Wynd could also see that Peter wasn’t properly outraged by his promiscuous habits. Peter’s act was slipping, he thought fearfully. His fascination with Wynd had to end. Defensively, he said, “The wages of sin is death.”

Wynd’s lips pressed together into a thin line and then he replied, “I didn’t take you for being the preachy kind, Reverend. Don’t bother trying to save my soul.”

“The church is always ready to welcome you, Wynd. Remember that. Redemption is always possible.”

“If you say so.” Wynd sounded sarcastic and his friendly demeanor disappeared entirely now.

They had both judged each other and found each other wanting. Peter’s judgement lacked conviction, given with words he didn’t believe. They were both gay and that was worthy of Hellfire in most religions. Peter was picking and choosing sins to condemn and Wynd wasn’t going to stay to listen to Peter be hypocritical.

“Goodbye and thanks for breakfast,” Wynd said it in a perfunctory manner. It was reflexive curtesy.

“Anytime.”

Peter meant it and he could tell he confused Wynd with his mixed signals.

Wynd shrugged, not in indifference, but like someone deciding to leave questions unasked.

“I’ve never been in the forest,” Peter admitted. “Sheriff Padilla thinks it’s

dangerous. When I saw Jeffie he was walking towards it. He could have slipped into a ravine, fell down into a cave, gotten lost or—”

“—been eaten by a bear?”

“It’s possible.”

“Don’t worry, Reverend, I read all the forestry pamphlets on how to avoid bears and the Dao has prayer flags tied to poles to guide people safely to the site.”

“Oh.”

Wynd gave a little snort, a nonverbal comment that told Peter to fill in the blank about how he felt just then. Annoyance that Peter was questioning his competence, Peter thought, and perhaps anger that Peter was using Jeffie as an example of careless behavior without considering how painful that comparison might be to Wynd. Peter didn’t know how to retract his insensitivity and Wynd didn’t give him the chance to make an apology. Wynd gave him a stiff nod and left, closing the door softly behind him.

Peter cleaned up the breakfast dishes, taking them to the sink and washing them as he wondered how he could have handled Wynd’s visit better. A full minute passed before his words registered in Peter’s brain.

Prayer flags.

His dream about Jeffie was foggy now, but Peter now distinctly remembered the flutter of a flag on a pole on the path leading him up the hill. He had to be recalling it wrong. He felt a chill of superstitious dread as he tried to bring logic to bear on the seemingly impossible. The crows in his dream had beaten their wings in slow motion as they had flown over the fields in search of insects. He remembered thinking that their wings had fluttered like black flags. That had to be it, just a mental association brought into a dream already filled with odd symbolism and deep seated fears. Wynd mentioning prayer flags was now making him disremember his dream and add a colorful flag printed with Tibetan prayers and Hindu gods.

Something loud clattered outside. Peter identified it before he opened the

door and stepped through it. Going around the side of his house to his garden shed, he found the flimsy door broken open and the garbage can tipped over on the ground. Garbage was strewn everywhere. Loco was carrying off the microwave tray from his dinner, some food still stuck to it. The dog's tail, covered in burrs, wagged slightly as he hurried with his prize into the tall grass. Peter's curses were inventive.

The cicadas were awake now and the crows and songbirds were vying for sound supremacy. Semis were grinding gears and making tires thrum as they negotiated the highway. Those sounds were the backbeat to Peter's tirade as he righted the can and cleaned up the garbage. When he was done venting and cleaning, he went back into his house, filled up a water bowl and a dish with dog food, and brought them back to the garbage can. He put them beside it and whistled. He might as well have been clapping for Tinker Bell. The dog didn't reappear.

Peter took a deep breath and slowly let it out, trying to dispel his anger at stray dogs and his sexual frustration caused by Wynd. He didn't have any more time to spend on Boho men, stray dogs, or flower beds. He had a sermon to write and paperwork to deal with. He went back inside his home, poured himself a steaming hot cup of coffee, and carried it to the church.

Petula had cleaned the church the previous day and it still smelled like lemon oil and floor cleaner. The light coming through the cleaned stain glass on the front doors made a kaleidoscope of color on the shiny wood of the back pews and the floor there. When Peter went down the main aisle he felt as if he was walking into another world; a holy place.

The office was a small room behind the pulpit. Its walls were lined with religious texts, histories, and old bibles. A desk dominated one corner with a rolling chair slightly pushed back from it. The top of the desk had neat file trays to collate paperwork, a stapler positioned with military precision next to a staple puller, two sharpened pencils, a pen, and a book of stamps. A perfectly stacked sheaf of papers was stuck with precisely placed yellow tabs to indicate

where Peter needed to sign his name. Checks also requiring his signature were paper clipped to bills. A calendar full of notes written in red ink, recorded Peter's scheduled priestly appearances and duties in the community. He had a wedding and an adult baptism to perform. He was also in charge of a charity kitchen fundraiser.

The office smelled like copier ink, old books, and Petula's floral perfume. Peter felt uncomfortable sitting in what he had come to know as *her chair*. It seemed almost intimate and that was the last thing he wanted to feel where it concerned Petula.

Peter performed his duties like a trained seal, but an appreciative trained seal. He placed his signed paperwork neatly in their respective *out* bins without reading their lengthy notes and itemized bullet points. He didn't worry if the weekly tithing deposit reflected the true total. He never questioned whether the exterminator really did cost \$400.00 to eradicate a mouse problem in the church. If Petula said he needed to pay a city fee to rent a spot in the main square for the food bank charity event, Peter never checked to make certain it wasn't being padded for Petula's benefit. He would no more suspect that Petula was skimming funds for a home in Tahiti, than he would suspect an angel of the Lord stealing funds from orphans and playing black jack in Las Vegas.

Being the wing man of an angel at a black jack table could make a man a guaranteed millionaire, Peter thought erroneously as he tucked the last paper into its out bin. He pictured it in his head as he took a notebook and index cards from a desk drawer and then dared to take a pencil out of its perfectly aligned position on the desk top. He played with the mental image, giving the angel wings and then mentally erasing them. An angel would want to go incognito of course. In the end, Peter's mental image of an angel playing black jack looked remarkably like Agent 007 in an adventure movie wearing an expensive Italian black and white suit. Shaken, not stirred.

Peter chastised his irreverence and mentally settled down to write his

sermon. Usually, the windowless room was conducive to finishing a sermon quickly. It had many books with tried and true sermons that he normally plagiarized. Jonathan Edwards', *The Excellency of Christ*, had been his biggest hit. There weren't any religious scholars among his congregation. Most sat in the pews every Sunday, but gave only lip service to being a Christian. Petula was the only one who brought her bible. It contained thousands of tabs indicating her favorite verses. The others used the bibles in the slots behind every pew.

Peter supposed this was the best church for someone like him, a gay false priest leading a flock of false Christians. They all mouthed the words but didn't feel it in their souls. Reverend Williams would have pointed out that showing up on Sundays and singing hymns didn't get a person into Heaven and he would have been able to make them believe it. Peter was a man who believed that good deeds were a factor. He could forgive his own lack if he forgave them in his congregation. He wondered if God would give their poor souls a free pass for having someone like him fail them so miserably, because, as far as he knew, despite their spiritual laziness, they were good people.

This time Peter didn't reach for a book to plagiarize. Instead, he sat and tapped his pencil against his notebook as he tried to think of a sermon, an original one. That decision carried with it an undercurrent of fear. The contrast between his sermon and a brilliant one from a religious scholar would be obvious. On Sunday, would his congregation notice that the Reverend was in poor form? Though the orphanage had taught him well, and he didn't speak like a city street thug, he had never finished high school. He couldn't write as if he were a learned and cultured leader of a church. That had been his reason for pulling sermons from William's large collection. The urge to create something all his own, to truly move his congregation, was new to him. Did some part of him want to be Peter Strike, to affect someone's mind, to bring their souls, not just their heads, to the word of the Lord and therefore be a hero like Peter? It wasn't the same as sacrificing his life, but carrying out the

life that had been cut short by doing what the real Peter would have wanted seemed a noble choice worthy of redemption.

His tapping turned into a beat after a few minutes of enduring blank thoughts. He recognized the song. It was the song *Cold* by Five Finger Death Punch. It seemed appropriate.

*I'm begging for forgiveness, everything I've done
If God is listening, He knows I'm not the only one
It's okay to lash out from the rules that I'm enslaved
But somehow someday, I'll have to turn the page*

Peter stopped tapping even though there was no one to hear it. Letting his guard down even in private might make him careless when he wasn't. His disguise had to be perfect.

He picked up his notebook, tucked his index cards into it, and stuck the pencil behind his ear. Peter needed more inspiration than four walls and reminders of his plagiarism could foster. He needed to go outside where his congregation of mostly farmers spent their days, under a hot, unrelenting sun tilling fields that were fickle mistresses and herding livestock over harsh terrain.

Chapter Six

It was in Peter's mind to walk around the grassy border of the church property and to let the sun, wildlife, and rocky ground give him some experience of a farmer's daily travail. Instead, he found himself searching for and finding a prayer flag attached to a stripped down stick stuck in the earth.

The prayer flag was blue, though stained darkly by morning dew. There was a stylized horse at the center and a figure on each corner. He recognized a griffin, tiger, dragon, and what he thought might be a small dog or a badly drawn lion. They were drawn in black ink on a one foot square piece of silk. Those figures were surrounded by a flowing script that repeated itself many times. The lotus flower at the top of the square seemed an indication of peaceful intentions. There were narrow strips of colored cloth tied to the stick beneath the flag. He saw five different colors all from different types of cloth. He failed to find anything resembling what Wynd had been wearing. He didn't want to think too hard about his ability to remember his clothing that accurately.

Peter guessed that those strips of cloth were from people in the Dao, a reassurance that members had passed that point safely and had not gotten lost in the forest. He found it disturbing that these people had walked by his church without his notice. He looked for something that might have come from Jeffie, but his memory was overlaid by his image of him as a wet corpse haunting his sleep. Besides, he suspected members removed their strips of cloth when they returned down the path to the Dao. It made him wonder if Wynd had removed his and returned to the Dao, or if he was still looking for Jeffie in the forest. Perhaps he had hooked up with his motorcycle riding friend again and they had returned together?

There was no reason to think the latter, but Peter couldn't help imagining it and feeling jealous. Jealousy had gotten Peter into trouble before. It was part of his compulsion to fulfill his desires without caring about other people

or consequences. He could feel its telltale sting now, the burn under his skin that made him wish Graymonger was missing instead of Jeffie. In fact, he was so wrapped up in that desire he didn't notice when he followed the narrow path through the tall grass to the top of the hill with its stand of extremely tall Lodge Pole pines. With his notebook now clutched tightly under his arm and breathing a little harshly from his upward climb, Peter found the path continuing down the hill again and across a field of mostly tall grass and dandelions. Peter could see a green prayer flag dangling limply from its stick at the forest's edge. In the far distance he could see small wisps of camp smoke rising from the treetops.

In the flickering shadows of the pines, Peter rested in the relative coolness of their shade and wondered what the hell he thought he was doing. Did he intend to go to the Dao in search of Wynd? He didn't know anything about the group except what Sheriff Padilla, his congregation, and the townsfolk had labeled them; a throng of morally deficit hippies who were throwing the ultimate bacchanalia. He couldn't deny the attraction.

Peter looked down at his notebook. Go back and plagiarize your sermon, he told himself. Keep playing your roll of Peter Strike and don't pretend you can be something you are not.

The Dao and Wynd tempted him with the promise of a decadent good time, though. Peter was in danger of losing everything if he gave in to either of them. His new lease on life would experience a brutal repo if he did. Talk would get around that their pious priest wasn't and his presence at the Dao would signal to Sheriff Padilla that he might be more involved with Jeffie's disappearance than he had thought. Being a person of interest sometimes reached the news. That news might reach the ears of a certain crime family back in California, even though that possibility seemed remote. Peter's executioners had found him by matching his face to a photo. It was fortunate for him that Peter Strike had been a child of a mixed race marriage as well. Soaked by rain and standing in the dim lighting of a closed tiki bar, they had

looked enough alike to give the murderers pause. Others had seen Peter's face, though. If they saw it on the news they could ID him positively and send more killers to finish the job.

An owl the size of cat flew by Peter's ear, startling him. It had made no sound, flying on wings buffered by evolutionary design as it headed out over the tall grass. He saw black bands on its tan feathers and a flat face dominated by huge black eyes. Those eyes had regarded him as it passed as if it were intelligent and in full knowledge of everything concerning him. It flew unerringly toward the forest and Peter watched it until it was among the first phalanx of evergreens.

Peter had been born and bred in the city; a child who had been raised in an orphanage and had later roamed the streets and avoided gunfire in the slums. As a man, he had eventually moved to California and played on sun kissed beaches while honing his skills as a thief and joining a crime syndicate. He had never strolled through a forest; especially one Sheriff Padilla had assured him was very dangerous. If he continued, he would most likely end up being another missing person, lost at the bottom of a ravine and dead from a broken neck.

Peter's eyes were still staring at the spot where the owl had slipped between the heavy boughs of the evergreens and disappeared even as he finally decided that he should turn and go back to his life as a fake priest and keep himself safe. Because of that he was able to see eight men walking along the tree line. They were dark figures, too far away to pick out any fine details, and they were traveling single file like soldiers and moving quickly. He thought of them as sinister, though he didn't have anything to support that judgement. Some sixth sense he had developed on the street was sounding a warning alarm in his mind. Or it could be a primitive memory buried in his genes that knew predators when he saw them.

Hunters, Peters mentally amended, but then recalled Two Birds saying it wasn't hunting season. Perhaps they were officers of Sheriff Padilla looking for

Jeffie. They weren't searching carefully for signs of him, though, and they seemed to have a destination they wanted to reach quickly.

A man paused at the end of the line and the sun glinted off something he held up. Were they binoculars? The glint panned, flashing brightly intermittently. The man stopped moving and he seemed to be looking at Peter. The glint went away and the man lowered and then lifted his arm in a way Peter was keenly familiar with.

Peter threw himself onto the soft bed of pine needles on the ground, convinced the man was aiming a gun at him. He heard a telltale pop, soft and distant, and something not human made a high pitched yelp.

Peter's heart hammered in his chest and the points of the pine needles dug into his skin as he gathered himself to get up and run. The other men had stopped walking, though, and were clustered together. The man who had fired the gun joined them instead of coming towards Peter to check whether his aim had been true. Maybe he was that confident of his skill as a marksman. Peter kept still and played dead.

The men seemed to be talking animatedly with each other as if arguing. Finally, they broke up and entered the forest moving quickly in single file.

Peter couldn't move. He was experiencing tunnel vision and he was shaking, a byproduct of a severe adrenalin dump into his system. A mantra was going through his head; *someone had tried to murder him*. Peter had been confident until then that he was living among sheep. The world had been peaceful, ordinary, and somewhat dull. He had expected it to continue that way until he died of old age playing his role of Peter Strike. Even Jeffie's disappearance had not been enough to shake his belief that he was living in some bucolic corner of the world. The mean streets were paying an unexpected visit and letting him know he had been living a fantasy.

A high pitched cry sounded, perhaps some beast in pain.

Long minutes passed before Peter's brain began to function again and he connected the sound of an animal in pain and the gunshot. He wrestled his

heart rate until it was under his control again as he realized that the gunman's target had not been him, but some poor animal unlucky enough to cross his path.

Peter immediately imagined Loco lying there in the tall grass wounded and dying. He didn't know why he concluded it was Loco. The hapless creature hadn't barked. It didn't sound like a dog as it voiced its pain. It sounded very much like a wild animal, a fox or a wolf at the very least.

In the city, people blindly walked by stray dogs and cats on the verge of starvation as well as people who lay passed out on the streets from illness or drunken stupors. In a collective case of avoidance behavior, they could even pretend that a legless vet, begging and holding out a dirty cup for spare change where he couldn't be missed, was invisible. In a city packed too tightly with humanity at every level of existence, people became numb to the constant presence of the dirty underbelly of society that coexisted side by side with the clean, modern buildings and the upwardly mobile citizenry. There were those charitable people who cared, but Peter wasn't alone back then when he had thought of them as suckers. In the slums where he had learned the tricks of a lawless trade, after leaving his one attempt to keep a job and be an upstanding citizen, charity was a luxury few could afford.

But that was the old him.

Peter hadn't realized, until that moment, that there was an old him, yet he contemplated going down there and rescuing a wounded animal most likely not Loco. It seemed an insane compulsion. Those men were still in the forest and they were armed and obviously callous. There was no guarantee that they wouldn't re-emerge and treat him in the same fashion as that poor animal. Peter's mind had already constructed a theory that those men were hunting illegally and might be willing to shoot anyone who discovered them. It was even possible that they had something to do with Jeffie's death. He couldn't fathom why murder was preferable to a hunting fine, but his imagination was still in panic mode. No behavior seemed too outrageous.

Loco needed him, though. If it *was* him— wounded— dying in pain.

Peter didn't rush down there to save the day until he was certain those men weren't coming back. Long minutes passed, agonizing minutes where even the cool under the boughs of the evergreens couldn't stop him from breaking out in a nervous sweat. He lay on pine needles and watched a green caterpillar make its laborious way across the uneven ground, was buzzed by a curious neon blue dragonfly, and twitched an arm when a fly settled there to drink his salty sweat.

Clouds were gathering and moving through the blue sky, making shadows on the tall grass, the forest, and the mountains beyond. The gray underbellies of the clouds and the towering thunderheads threatened rain. Those moving clouds urged Peter forward, out of the trees, down the hill, and across the field of tall grass and wildflowers. He passed the fluttering prayer flag there. The wind picked at it and his hair, confirming that rain was a real possibility.

Peter found blood splattered and pooled on the ground and then a dripping trail leading through bent grass blades towards the forest. Blood in real life wasn't like in the movies. A large quantity from someone, or some animal bleeding out, was thick, copious, and alarming. The blood the victim had left behind in this case didn't look survivable.

Peter had a flashback as he stood looking down at all that blood, a PTSD moment where he could feel the wetness of his rain soaked clothing, feel the fleeing warmth of the dying man in his arms, and smell salt from the crashing surf on the beach.

As if on cue, a light summer rain began falling in real life, hitting the fields, the forest, and Peter with light plopping sounds that began slowly increasing as the rain began in earnest. It woke him from his flashback moment and he hurried to escape the worst of the downpour inside the thick forest of beachwood, ash, elm, and evergreen trees. The blood continued there, a clear trail over ferns, vines, treacherous tree roots, and uneven, rocky ground.

Peter used the back of his hand to wipe sweat and rain from his face and then followed the trail deeper into the forest.

The patter of rain and some birdsong were the only sounds in the forest besides his footsteps. Those sounds seemed distant, muffled by the face beat of his heart. Peter felt dizzy with the anxiety coursing through him and he worried about his blood pressure.

The trail of blood thinned and then became hidden in a part of the forest covered in low bramble bushes and ferns. Peter anxiously searched the area, pushing aside the undergrowth despite the thorns, and walking in a circle. He wasn't sure what alerted him, perhaps some hair trigger awareness of his surroundings he had learned on the streets, but Peter suddenly looked up and saw it.

No one had said anything about there being mountain lions in the area.

Peter's already overtaxed brain collapsed like a house of cards as he confronted the creature a few yards ahead of him. Standing in a thick fern break, it seemed frozen in place as if posing for an award winning wildlife photo. Its fur was thick and beautiful. Its eyes were large and brown and its nose, with its little black markings on each side, made it look cute and approachable. Peter wasn't fooled. Mountain lions were deadly, shaped by evolution to bring down large prey. This mountain lion was displaying the same twitch at the end of its long tail and alert curiosity Peter had seen in cats when they are about to switch from warm, purring pet to feral killer.

Peter turned and ran.

Wynd licked his fingers as he walked up the hill. He relished the taste of cinnamon sugar. It made him think of breakfast at his parent's summer home in New England, a white wooden structure with a tin roof, perched on the dunes overlooking the ocean. The dark polished wood interior, the narrow cozy halls and bedrooms, and the little fireplace that always won the battle against the chill of sudden Nor' Easters, held good memories besides hot

cinnamon toast and salted eggs over easy breakfasts. It was a haven of peace he still visited on occasion and the only property he had kept after his parent's death. In all else, he was a footloose gypsy and liked it that way. Perhaps one day he would settle down and sink some roots into the New England soil, but he was young still and liked the freedom of a rolled tent and an oversized ruck sack as his only belongings.

Wynd approached the Dao flag. He almost passed it, but then remembered his strip of turquoise leather and removed it. He touched Jeffie's, a strip from an old brown scarf decorated with sunflowers. Wynd remembered him taking it from the bottom of his backpack and pointing out a dirt stain as the reason he didn't mind using it. They had shown their strips to each other, and a few others, so the Dao would know whether they had left or returned to the camp. Jeffie's strip was more memorable than Wynd's strip of turquoise leather and to be fair, Wynd doubted few except Graymonger would remember him as much as they remembered Jeffie and his golden California style beauty. Wynd patted Jeffie's scarf and silently promised to find him before leaving the flag behind and continuing up the hill.

When Wynd reached the stand of lodge pole pines, he inhaled their evergreen scent. His boots and lower leggings were wet with dew and a few burrs were stuck to his socks. After several days in town, he felt the need for clean clothes, a bath, and a solid meal. The amenities at the Dao were primitive, and the only bath he would get was in a stream, but he would feel safe enough there to take advantage of them. Not that every person in the Dao was trustworthy, but collectively he felt safest in numbers of like-minded individuals rather than among strangers who hated him.

Wynd felt discouraged that his search for Jeffie hadn't produced any results. Hampering Wynd's search had been the fact that Padilla had been actively looking for him to help meet his *quota*. Unbeknownst to Graymonger, he had been instrumental in helping him avoid both Padilla and his officers. Once Wynd had proven his escort wasn't going away, their interest had

evaporated. He had spent the night with Graymonger, huddled together in a camper behind an overgrown property. It had smelled like mildew and rodents, but it had kept out an unseasonal chill. Wynd had lied to Strike. Graymonger had been a perfect gentleman.

They had parted ways in front of the church. Graymonger had given Wynd a courtly bow and promised to escort him to the Dao after he returned his motorcycle to the place where the members of the Dao were parking their vehicles outside of the forest. The forest path near the church was shorter, though, and Wynd had used that reason to separate himself from Graymonger. He hadn't wanted him with him when he paid his unexpected visit to the Reverend.

Catching people unawares often helped reveal a person's true personality. A young, handsome man, who people in town described as a pious loner who had been devoted to his late father, the previous pastor of the church, seemed the beginning line when describing a serial killer. The character of loner, really nice guy, straight laced, and quiet seemed to be the preferred part played by truly heinous individuals in the past.

The Reverend Strike had seemed nervous. There was something about him that spoke of having lived in the worst parts of a big city, yet nothing about him had triggered a sixth sense in Wynd that he might be hiding more than a stint in a gang, or perhaps some time spent in jail. His eyes weren't cold or calculating. His concern for Wynd had felt entirely genuine. He had personal experience enough to know that killers didn't usually fulfill a man's request for toast with cinnamon sugar, and get embarrassed over ants, when he was secretly thinking of burying him in the flower beds after perpetrating some horrible assault on his person.

Strike's sudden switch from a gay man obviously lusting after Wynd, to a prim priest worried about the state of Wynd's soul, had startled Wynd. Strike's smoldering gray eyes, smooth cream in coffee complexion, and generous smile, had revved Wynd's own libido. Strike's tall, tightly knit body was a promise of

long, romantic nights of hot sex and being enfolded in the warm embrace of his long arms afterward. If he hadn't criticized Wynd with a well-chosen passage from the bible, Wynd might have considered staying for a morning roll in the sheets. While Strike seemed a progressive type of pastor, perhaps willing to embrace his sexuality, he had given a conflicting message about Wynd's choices. Wynd disliked hypocrites.

Wynd told himself he needed to concentrate on the case anyway and not let hot priests distract him. Padilla was still Wynd's number one suspect even though he had few facts to support his belief. What he did know could fill a post-it note. For reasons unknown, Jeffie had felt it necessary to slip out of the Dao and go into town. Wynd felt that, though they hadn't known each other long, Jeffie would have at least texted a brief goodbye and an explanation if he had decided to leave permanently. Since Wynd had failed to find him in town, and he had already searched the forest path, it was now necessary to search the forest edge and the land around the church. That was best done alone, without the distraction of Graymonger, so Wynd could concentrate and walk what would amount to a crime scene grid formation.

As Wynd started down the hill towards the Dao flag at the edge of the forest, he saw a fox crisscrossing the path that cut between the tall grasses of the fields on either side. The fox wasn't a fiery red color, but black and brown with a few red highlights. White tips on its ears helped him follow its erratic movements when it ducked in and out of shadow as it hunted. Wynd watched it cautiously as he approached. Foxes attacking people were not unheard of and some carried rabies.

A couple of crows dive bombed the fox as they cawed loudly in what sounded like a crow version of swearing. The fox ducked and disappeared into the tall grass without reappearing. Wynd felt more fearful not knowing where the fox was and altered his steps to leave the path and circumnavigate the field. He took his time, searching for clues as he walked. After pushing through the tall grass and the wild flowers to reach a clearing near the border

of the forest, he was dismayed to find his leggings were full of burrs. He crouched down in disgust and began pulling the burrs off.

Running was contrary to all the advice Peter had been given via nature documentaries and urban legend. He was supposed to freeze or play dead, raise his arms and make threatening noises, and never turn his back. Peter wasn't thinking, though, and in full panic. The mountain lion was making horrendous sounds behind him, not trying to run him down silently. The noise ceased after long moments, but Peter didn't slow down or look back.

The rain became a downpour even under the forest canopy. His feet were tangling in what had looked like delicate ferns and leafy vines, but were now as impervious to breakage as thick sisal rope. Some of those vines had thorns. They wrapped around his feet and ankles and then were whipped away by his forward progress, turning them into mini versions of razor wire. In seconds he was leaving his own trail of bloody droplets.

Tree roots, thick mats of pine needles, and dead leaves were more obstacles to a hasty retreat. Peter tripped, slid, and fell down twice, but he scrambled back to his feet immediately and kept running each time as he imagined the hot breath of the mountain lion at his neck.

Mountain lion— puma—cougar: some separate part of Peter's mind, strangely unaffected by his panic, was going over everything it knew about the cat, perhaps searching for some bit of knowledge that might save him. Instead, his alarm went up another notch when he began remembering stories about joggers attacked and eaten by mountain lions. Maybe that's what had happened to Jeffie.

Peter fell, tripping on the tree root of an ancient elm, and slid a few feet on his belly in wet pine needles and dead leaves. When his forward motion stopped, he found himself face to face with a fox that had brownish black fur and white tips on its ears. It was dead, lying in the last of its blood, and probably the animal the hunter/police officer/ cold blooded killer had shot. The

fox leered at him, its mouth open and its tongue hanging out of it. Its eyes were open as well and fixed in a glassy stare. Peter saw a beetle crawl over one of its sightless orbs while the smell of rank wet fox and blood filled Peter's nostrils.

For a split second Peter felt relief that it wasn't Loco, before horror supplanted it and he scrambled backwards like a crab to get away from the body.

Peter staggered to his feet, panting, soaked, and now covered in forest muck. He dared to look behind him. The forest was blurred by rain. The steady downpour muffled all other noises. Not that Peter imagined he would be able to hear the mountain lion stalking him. Like a cat, it would be soundless, crouched in hiding and getting ready to spring. When, after several agonizing minutes, that didn't happen, Peter dared to hope it hadn't chased after him after all. Maybe it had learned to be wary of humans, or had tasted human at some point in its life and hated it.

Peter attempted to walk backwards for a few yards, looking for the slightest movement of fern or underbrush that indicated that the cat was there and playing with him before it finished him off. He tripped, staggered, and wind milled his arms to keep his balance with almost every step. When the undergrowth hampered his progress too much, he was finally forced to stop. Reason began to reassert itself. He couldn't continue like that. He might fall to his death into a ravine or a hole leading to a cave with a backbreaking drop.

The rain slowed until it became intermittent droplets as Peter gathered his courage. Finally, he slowly turned and confronted the forest. As birds began to sing and the light rain pattered on the leaves overhead, he realized something he had been trying desperately to avoid thinking about. He needed to go back the way he had come. Escape from the forest didn't mean going deeper into it. The fox gave him confidence that he wasn't far from the forest's edge. While primal fear wanted Peter to get as much distance between him and a predator as possible, his brain knew his picture would likely join the ones of the other

missing people in a dusty cold case folder that no one bothered to touch. Why bother investigating, after all, when the forest claimed the bones of fools on a yearly basis and almost never revealed them.

Peter turned around reluctantly and scanned the forest. He wiped at rain water dripping off his nose and shoved the soaked tangle of his hair off his forehead. He was acutely aware of his soaked mud covered body, the sting of his cut ankles and lower legs, and his sweaty stench. It didn't rival that of the dead fox, but adrenaline sweat was sour, as if pulled out of his core, and it had made a salty film on his skin. Everything within him longed for his dry home, a hot shower, a thick robe, and a hot cup of coffee steaming between his hands.

In a corner of his mind he was angry at Loco. Even though Loco had shown himself to be skittish and contrary, Peter still expected him to show up like Lassie in the old television show to lead him to safety. That didn't make sense, since Loco wasn't attached to him in anyway, but Peter was grasping at straws and hoping for the impossible.

Peter had to again confront the dead fox, possibly the mountain lion, and perhaps the men with their unknown agenda and clear leanings toward cruelty.

Peter turned to his right and walked in that direction, not because he knew where he was going, but because he had suddenly formulated a shaky plan and flipped a mental coin. Somehow, he had to go around the area where the mountain lion might be lurking, stay alert for any sound of the men, and find his way back to where his waking nightmare had all started, the Dao prayer flag at the edge of the forest. Peter wasn't confident he could manage all of that, but not trying was 100 percent fatal.

Peter flirted with the hope that the path to the Dao was well trod and marked. He didn't remember seeing an obvious trail, but he hadn't been looking either. If he circled, he reasoned, he would eventually find such a trail if it existed and follow it back. It seemed more sound than hoping for a Lassie

like rescue from Loco.

Chapter Seven

Wynd pulled at the burrs carefully, gritting his teeth as they snagged and pulled on the material of his colorful leggings. It wasn't until he had pulled off the last one and began to stand up, that he realized his dread locks had been brushing up against another cluster of burs. His hair pulled painfully when he tried to straighten.

Wynd's cell phone chose that moment to announce a text. A short few notes of his ringtone, an African kalimba, was soft, but commanded an instance response from him.

"Shit!"

With his hair in the clutches of bundles of painful barbs, Wynd fumbled to find his cell in his bag and then brought it out where he could see it. It was seemingly a text from his carrier asking him if he wanted to change his plan, but the button to stop notifications in the future did more than stop future annoying texts. Wynd pushed the button and pocketed his phone.

A rush of annoyance was more than about his tangled hair. Wynd didn't like when people questioned his competence. Sitting around a dung fire in the middle of the Mongolian steppes, while learning intricate knot work for decorations from his host family, had taught him patience. With only the sun and deepest night to mark day and night, and the harsh wind and the occasional thunder of pony hooves the only sounds beside soft conversation, he had learned not to mark time by a clock. The people, in what he liked to call the *two second world*, could benefit by staying a few months in that environment.

Wynd's nimble, ring covered fingers teased his hair, little by little, out of the cluster of burrs. His many bracelets chimed together with his motions. When the rain began to fall, he cursed again. It was a warm rain and light, covering him with diamond like beads of water, but he didn't like getting wet. He forced himself to go slow, though, and ignore it. Pulling wasn't going to get

him free without losing a clump of his hair.

“I told you, no.”

Wynd froze.

“We could have accused him of casing the vehicles,” another voice complained.

“A perfect set up,” a third grumbled. “Alone and probable cause: he was a sitting duck and he wouldn’t have been suspicious.”

“He wore the tag,” the first reminded them. “You know they’re off limits. That’s the deal we made.”

“Fuck the deal,” the third swore.

“They’ll fuck you if you bring him in,” the second warned.

A shot rang out. Wynd threw himself to the ground, gritting his teeth in pain as he left some of his hair in the clump of burs.

“What the fuck?” the first exclaimed.

“Rabid fox,” the second spat back. “See the way he ran around? It wasn’t natural.”

“You’re a lousy shot,” the first man said. “It dragged itself into the woods.”

“It won’t be hard to find,” the third man replied. “We’ll get the body on the way back and have it tested.”

“That’s all we need,” the first man complained, “Rabies in our county.”

Their voices faded as they walked away from Wynd’s hiding place.

After an hour of snapping deadwood under his feet, slogging through wet ferns and dead leaves, and stepping over fallen logs Peter was convinced he was well and truly lost. The rain had stopped. The cicadas, a few frogs, and a couple of chattering squirrels were the only witnesses to his complete failure to find any sort of trail. He kept doggedly walking, though, as he swatted at mosquitoes and wondered how he could safely drink from the puddles of water all around him that taunted his growing thirst.

Peter had to concede that he didn't have any primal DNA memory of being a hunter and didn't possess an ability to sense directions accurately. In fact, he had probably been the primitive equivalent of a Neanderthal accountant, kept in a cave to count berries, flint knives, and animal hides instead of ineptly joining in the hunt. Since the forest looked the same in every direction, he was half convinced he was walking in circles and expected to find the corpse of the dead fox again at any moment.

Luckily, like the parting of the gates to Heaven, a particular nasty, thorn filled tangle of low branches and bushes parted to reveal the edge of the forest a few yards away. Already stuck with thorns, Peter risked more injury as he pushed harder at the bushes and branches and forced his body through them. He left skin and blood behind as he staggered out of them on the opposite side and stumbled for the streaming sunlight coming through the thinning trees. He didn't exit the forest near the prayer flag, but when he left the trees behind with an exclamation of, "Thank God!" he could see it in the distance, soggy with rain and drooping, but still high enough to be visible over the tall grass.

A dog barked once. Peter turned to his left and saw Loco watching him, his curious blue eyes and cinnamon tipped ears just visible over wildflowers and grass. An orange butterfly was trying to land on his ear. He flicked his ear a few times and then, as if satisfied, disappeared without a rustle of greenery. The butterfly flew in a circle, as if looking for its perch, and then drifted away towards a thick clump of dandelions.

Peter felt furious, even though he told himself it wasn't the dog's fault he had lost himself in the forest. It also wasn't the dog's fault that he wasn't Lassie. He was a stray, probably abused and wary of human contact. He had offered Peter his companionship and Peter had spurned it. Though Loco liked Peter's leftovers, he wasn't offering friendship a second time.

Peter didn't feel in the mood to be logical, though. He felt exhausted, sore, thirsty, and wet through. He imagined Loco laughing at him, by his presence alone rubbing in the fact Peter had been utterly out of his element and

helpless. If Peter had found a rock or a branch, he would have flung it after the dog, but the dead grass under the new growth was thick and tangled. It held any projectile locked tightly in its dead embrace.

Exhaustion won over anger. Peter walked to the prayer flag as if needing that reassuring landmark instead of simply walking through the fields towards the church and his home. The climb up the hill to the lodge pole pines seemed an eternity. Peter found his wet, bedraggled notebook where he had dropped it in the shadow of the pines. He wearily picked it up and shook off the pine needles and the wet. A few blank note cards fell out and he didn't bother picking them up. Peter bitterly remembered his enthusiasm when he had started out to find inspiration for his first original sermon. The notebook was ruined now, completely soaked by rain. He dropped it and it hit the pine needle loam with little sound. He supposed it was a metaphor for his life. He had made just as little impact. He wasn't going to find redemption by writing words that would change the hearts and souls of his congregation. They would hear how hollow those words were coming from a man who hadn't changed his own heart and soul yet.

As Peter started down the hill, he approached the last Dao flag. He noticed the odd brown one with the Sunflowers was missing and assumed it must have been Wynd's, even though he couldn't recall him wearing such a cloth. That missing cloth made Peter unreasonably angry and he cursed, as if, like Loco, Wynd could have found him in the forest and had purposefully not. His delay in going down the trail to the Dao was a mystery. It wasn't until Peter reached the bottom of the hill that he considered Wynd might have seen the same men and had felt just as wary of them. It lessened his anger, but not enough. Peter felt too miserable and sorry for himself.

The rainwater evaporated in the heat and it became hot and humid by the time he reached the fields by the church. No longer cooled by his wet state, he grew hotter with every step.

Crows flew around him. They cawed to each other, not in alarm, but as if

they were discussing Peter. Grasshoppers and small insects fled his approach. The loud endless drone of the cicadas made his growing headache even worse.

When Peter finally reached his home, he opened the door of the side entrance that led into the kitchen. When his cozy kitchen, with its cool wonderful A.C. unit and refrigerator full of cold drinks was revealed, he felt relief so keen he felt dizzy. Going inside and shutting the door on cruel Mother Nature and vicious men with unknown agendas, he longed for a shower to wash away sweat and the muck of the forest. That need warred with his desperate desire for a drink. It was a stalemate. Peter grabbed a bottle of cold water from the refrigerator and took it into the bathroom with him. After stripping off his shoes and clothing, he stepped into the shower and turned it on, drinking from the water bottle while cool water splashed over his filthy body.

When Peter had finished the water, he let the empty bottle drop to the floor of the tub. It clattered and came to rest in the drain. As he bent his head and let the water wash through his hair, he watched the water struggle to go down the drain as it rolled and spun the bottle. When he began to scrub his body and hair with shampoo and soap, the water turned dark with dirt. The dirty suds made the same spiral pattern as the water and they went down the drain together as if they had a suicide pact. It was awhile before the water ran clear.

As Peter finally turned the knob to make the water warmer, he had thoughts like a child. He told himself he was never going into the woods again. It was a bad place and he wasn't cut out to be a woodsman. There were man-eating beasts and insects there. In the city he would avoid gang hangouts. This wasn't any different. The men he had seen were the rural equivalent of a gang. They were armed, cruel, and sure of their supremacy. It bothered him that Wynd walked that forest fearlessly, but the shame of not being as brave as a small, lithe man in leotards and dread locks wasn't enough to banish his new forest phobia.

Thoughts of Wynd gave Peter an instant hard on. He stroked his cock's

large length, released it, let it bob, and then grabbed it again and rubbed the head in a tight fist. He played choke the chicken while he imagined pounding deeply between Wynd's tight, round globes. He could imagine the spray of water beading that delicious fair skin and red hair, kissing along the man's slim neck, and stretching him wide on his dark swollen cock. Peter came hard, crying out a little and then biting his lip as if someone might hear him. He shot his load against the tile, painting it in hot spurts.

After Peter recovered from his orgasm and finished his shower, he found himself back in the church office and selecting a book of sermons from the book shelf. Petula's lingering perfume and the smell of old books was comforting now. He needed normal like a man on the edge of a heart attack needed his nitroglycerin pills.

Psalm 119 and verse 9:

Wherewithal shall a young man cleanse his way.

By taking heed thereto according to thy word.

With my whole heart have I sought thee:

O let me not wander from thy commandments.

Thy word have I hid in mine heart,

that I might not sin against thee.

Blessed art thou, O Lord: teach me thy statutes.

With my lips have I declared all the

judgments of thy mouth. I have rejoiced

in the way of thy testimonies, as much as

in all riches. I will meditate in thy precepts,

and have respect unto thy ways. I will delight

myself in thy statutes: I will not forget thy word.

The following sermon about temptations was very strong and well written. It spoke to Peter and, as he sat down to plagiarize it, he took the words to heart. Wynd was temptation. If he followed that wild child into a den of

inequity, there would only be one outcome. When trying to break bad habits, the number one rule was to never go where those old habits had been cultivated in the first place. Peter didn't like to consider a biker bar, and a willing biker, temptations, but Peter wasn't a saint. At least those were temptations that didn't set their hooks into him and try to pull him back into his life of crime. Wynd was another matter entirely. Peter could easily see himself falling hard for him and following where ever he led. Wynd was the Devil's piper, Peter thought as he made talking points under the sermon, one of the mythical evil spirits that came with the Summer Solstice on a hot breeze and left with the first chill of autumn. Reality was in agreement, though. Wynd's novelty was enticing, but in the end, a gypsy life on the road, going from one gathering to another, and living a life of hedonism, wasn't in Peter's plans. He hoped Wynd would stay at the Dao and not tempt him any further.

Wynd kept still long after the men stopped talking. He ignored the light rain that threatened to become more, the ants making their way up and down blades of grass and the uneven ground and the huge green grasshopper poised on a dandelion cleaning its antenna as raindrops covered it and made it seem dressed in diamonds. Crows dipped low, undaunted by the rain, to caw at him as if to say that he hadn't fooled them by his subterfuge.

Finally, Wynd couldn't stay still any longer. The dread of being discovered mounted in agonizing increments. This was the second time he had been forced to hide. That wasn't his nature. He was known for being fearless. Wynd could change like a chameleon, speak many languages, and was an encyclopedia of knowledge about even obscure nationalities. He had never been this off his game. He had to take back control or he might never find out the truth of Jeffie's disappearance, or the disappearances of so many members of the Dao.

Cautiously, Wynd raised his head enough to see over the tops of the grass

and wildflowers. He listened intently while his eyes scanned the forest line for any movement. He felt like a hunted deer and hoped he wouldn't end up like Bambi's mother, thinking it was safe right before he took a bullet in the heart. His bracelets clinked and clattered as he raised a hand to push some of the vegetation aside. He winced and froze. When no masculine shout of alarm sounded, he pushed at the vegetation again, giving himself enough room to stand. The grasshopper continued to clean even though its flower perch was moving.

The rain increased. The forest promised to blunt the worst part of the down pour. Wynd passed the Dao flag there and entered the forest's cool depths. He saw the blood on the ground and thought of the fox. He knew there was too much blood, though, and that it had to be dead. There wasn't a reason to look for it.

Boot prints in the mud told him the men were following the path to the Dao. Putting himself in danger wasn't in his plan. He was there to gather information only, using his keen powers of observation and his ability to easily get inside the offbeat parts of any society. He wasn't there to become another victim.

Wynd took out his phone and used his GPS and maps program to research an alternative route. Hiking trails were few. Two converged and led to the Dao, the one he had been going to take and the one Graymonger would use once he parked his bike. The third trail was long and wound through a great deal of the forest. It passed through the Dao, though, and continued on into the State park. Getting to it wasn't going to be as easy, but it was better than running into those men. With the wet beginning to soak through his clothing, frogs beginning a chorus as if in celebration of the rain, and the patter of rain on the leaves of the upper canopy, he pushed through the undergrowth and began his long hike.

Sheriff Padilla scowled at the Dao banner. The rain slowed to a light

sprinkle and it made the surrounding grasses and pine trees give off a fresh scent. The Dao flag was soaked though and it joined with the strips of cloth to hang in a soggy, limp, colorful tangle. One strip of cloth was particularly recognizable; a strip torn from a brown scarf decorated with yellow sunflowers. Padilla removed it, teasing the wet knot open with large, blunt fingers as he silently cursed. He hated sloppiness. Lately, his usually well trained men were infected with it.

How could one little skinny Dao fag give his men so much trouble?

The man was as wary and as canny as a feral cat. He had stayed one step ahead of his men at every turn and left no opportunities to take him into custody, official or otherwise. Padilla had personally stood in the deep shadows of the forest, seething while he watched him eat pastries, drink coffee, and make arrangements to keep Graymonger with him. His questions about Jeffie and his visit with the priest had put him on Padilla's radar. He was the only person asking about Jeffie, the man that had been personally selected for Padilla's quota because of his lack of attachments in the Dao and elsewhere. He needed to be taken care of permanently. If it helped Padilla fill his quota, it was a welcome bonus.

Padilla narrowed his dark eyes and scanned the hill and the surrounding fields. His men were in the forest with instructions to stay on the trail to the Dao and to wait for him. Padilla was back up, there to make sure he didn't spot them and return to the priest for help. Padilla had listened in on their conversation, standing by the door of the priest's kitchen. He had discovered nothing that alarmed him about the priest. Strike was a loner who served the community but kept apart from it. Padilla had been keeping him under surveillance for some time. He hadn't been surprised by the man's visits to a biker bar far out of town, or that he was gay, because Padilla believed the church was full of hypocrites. The priest's interest in the Dao hippy was therefore understandable. Strike liked wild guys. He didn't like them enough to search for lost ones, though. That made him safe from Padilla, for now, even

though Strike had inexplicably walked up the hill with a notebook and had yet to return. Strike's slow steps had looked contemplative and directionless, as if he looked for poetic inspiration, or similar such nonsense.

The Dao fag was another matter. Though Stanwyck had ordered Padilla to forget him, he felt his authority was being challenged and that he had made a fool out of Padilla. That was two things he refused to accept from bitches. Though Padilla actively looked for other targets, he still felt confident he could collect him.

The sound of a sudden gunshot startled Padilla. He jerked his cell phone off the clip on his belt and called his men.

Deputy Mercer answered with a ridiculous, "Yellow? Hey, Rio?"

"What the fuck is going on!" Padilla barked. He hated that the man insisted on calling him by his nickname. That wasn't protocol for his underlings.

"Nothin', Rio," his man replied. "Jinx thought he saw a rabid fox. We'll investigate when we come back."

"How will you do that when you have the Dao hippy with you?" Padilla said heatedly.

"Oh yeah, guess we won't."

"In case you've forgotten, this is supposed to be an undercover operation!" Padilla said loudly and hung up his cell, not waiting for the man's probable inane reply.

Padilla rubbed at his forehead as a headache started. He stared up the hill, wondering why the priest wasn't running for his life. After a long while, he cautiously dared to go up the hill to look for the man, already rehearsing a likely excuse for his being there. When he reached the stand of pine trees, he had a good vantage point to survey the area. He saw the priest's notebook on the ground getting wet, but no sign of the man.

Padilla growled a curse and took out his cell again. The priest had just removed himself from the safe category.

"Yel—"

“I think the priest might be in the forest. Make sure he doesn’t see you.”

“Let me kill him,” the man begged. “I don’t like that preachy bastard. My wife makes me go to his church every damned Sunday. I could be sleep—”

“Shut-up, I said avoid him.” Padilla lowered his cell when he saw Wynd walk out of the tall grass and enter the forest. He put his cell to his ear again.

“—but he’s such a friggin’ boring priest, not like Reverend Williams—”

Padilla cut in. “I just spotted the Dao hippy. He’s walking down the trail to the Dao. Intercept him.”

“Right, boss!”

Padilla hung up his cell and put it back on his belt clip as the rain started coming down in earnest. He wished he could fire that man and the trigger happy Jinx, but the problem with doing illegal things was that a man couldn’t have loose ends that might possibly give away the operation. Murder was easy to commit, but covering up the death of a man that would be missed by many wasn’t so easy. That took careful planning and Padilla didn’t have time for that. He would eventually leave it up to Stanwyck. He was certain he could make any death look like an accident, especially the deaths of two men known for hunting deep in the woods.

Padilla took cover from the rain under the trees and felt an almost sexual thrill as he imagined the Dao fag’s fear and surprise when his men caught him on the trail. So much for uppity bitches, he thought with a cold smirk.

Benjamin Blumenfeld checked his watch. It was almost time for him to have his lunch. As was his new habit, he would get his bagged turkey on rye sandwich and can of Pepsi from the small fridge under his work counter and take his lunch into the peaceful forest. In reality, he hated nature and he didn’t consider a forest peaceful in the least. To him, it was an unceasing smorgasbord of eat or be eaten and he didn’t want to be on the menu. He was an overweight, elderly man, with arthritis and a hip that was giving him trouble. His balding head, strong prescription glasses, and plain, brown slacks

and tan button down shirt under his white lab coat, made him look the part of a scientist, not a man who frequented the rugged outdoors. There was no other way of finding the dog, though, the dog that loved turkey on rye sandwiches.

Subject 937854B6, or unofficially; Freckles, was damned elusive and for good reason. Being an experimental animal usually cut a subject's life painfully short. Blumenfeld should have listened when the man who had brought his newest subjects had warned that the dog was a con artist. Blumenfeld had laughed, thinking the man had been joking. The damned animal had totally played him, pretending to be so docile, almost comatose on the exam table.

The mobile research RV was worth millions. When stationary, the ceiling rose to make a second story, and widened on both sides to accommodate the row of cages holding test subjects, the exam table, and research instruments. It even had a small, yet comfortable living space on the second floor for when he wanted to escape the stench and noise of the animals. It wasn't an impenetrable, escape proof fortress though. It was still an RV.

Blumenfeld had turned his back to take a call. The bang of the RV door had alerted him. Turning back around, he had found the dog not only off the exam table, but that the beast had expertly used the door lever to exit the RV. Blumenfeld had grabbed a stun gun and given chase, but the dog had gone, taking with him humanity's best hope for survival and the lunch Blumenfeld had left on a table, his turkey on rye sandwich. Blumenfeld was lucky none of the guards had witnessed the escape.

Blumenfeld hadn't dared make a report. He knew how dangerous desperate people could be. He knew that failures weren't tolerated. His was a monumental failure. He had hidden the dog's charts, secured his online records, and broken down the dog's cage so his absence from the long line of other subjects wasn't apparent. Freckles unusual coat coloring made him unforgettable, though. Blumenfeld felt lucky he was mostly left to himself and visits by those in authority were infrequent. One of them might remember the

dog and ask questions. Blumenfeld had time to search, but not an infinite amount of time. Fortunately, he had waited to perform further testing before sending his results to his superiors or he might have been eliminated already.

The dogs were quiet in their cages as he passed them. Three mixed hounds, a little brown terrier, and a German shepherd gave him soulful, worried looks with their big, sad eyes. Two young chimpanzees were both sleeping, looking like young children as they clutched their blankets and looked innocent and relaxed. Blumenfeld wasn't moved. Their vulnerability didn't make him lenient when it came to injecting them with substances he knew might be deadly. One of the guards had called them collateral damage. They probably thought that about the human test subjects as well. Both types of subjects were martyrs to the cause, the cause of human survival.

Blumenfeld opened the door of the RV and negotiated the steep aluminum steps with difficulty. He paused at the bottom to check the voluminous pockets of his white lab coat for his stun gun and a leash. A blood stain was on one pocket. He fingered it with an annoyed frown.

"Going for your walk?"

Blumenfeld started and narrowed eyes at the guard. The man was a large specimen that clearly inhabited a gym at least three hours a day. Their cover was that they were a group of campers. Blumenfeld hadn't bothered dressing the part, but this man had taken his assignment seriously. He wore a red plaid shirt, worn blue jeans, and hiking boots. He carried a rifle rather than a pistol, as if he intended to hunt a bear or an elk at a moment's notice. The man's crew cut, squared off chin, and deadly serious blue eyes wouldn't fool a toddler, though, Blumenfeld thought sourly. He still looked like a soldier. There was something about his expression as well, an unusual focus; the look of a predator, or a killer.

Blumenfeld touched his large stomach and said with a rueful grimace. "I need the exercise."

That simple phrase was calculated. Blumenfeld had minored in psychology.

He knew how to lie effectively. He had purposefully spoken to this man's passion. Now all the man could think about was exercise, calorie intake, and how long Blumenfeld would have to walk to counteract the turkey on rye sandwich and Pepsi he was shortly about to consume. He didn't consider for a moment the fact that Blumenfeld hadn't exercised in the slightest since their meeting, had only expressed dislike of the forest, and had in fact rarely taken breaks from his research. A man didn't stop throwing water on the fire to take a stroll when his house was burning, after all, Blumenfeld thought. This guard would have been a great deal more excited and insistent that Blumenfeld not take a break, if he knew the Human race was on fire.

Few people knew the truth and that was due to a lot of graves filled with potential whistleblowers. Four years of covert research under the cover of curing a deer tick epidemic had worked nicely so far, but sometimes those in the know got cold feet and wrongly began to believe that informing the public, and causing a mass panic, was their civic duty. Being Jewish, Blumenfeld understood the holocaust intimately. He couldn't allow a new one perpetrated on infected people. He felt like a true hero, even though no one might ever know about his contribution to their survival. Even if they found a cure, his group of rogue researchers intended to never inform the public or the government. They would sweep their sin of playing God under the proverbial carpet.

"Walk fast and move your arms as you walk," the guard suggested, as if he was giving Blumenfeld a plan that would get him through a minefield. "Get your heart rate elevated and try to keep it there."

Blumenfeld nodded. "I'll do that. Thank you, Ronald."

"We've got a mini gym in our RV," Ronald informed him. "You're welcome to use it anytime."

"I'll consider it." In reality, Blumenfeld would have let his test subjects eat him alive first. The thought of exercising in front of testosterone pumped, physically fit guards gave him flashbacks to high school where he had been a

bullied, awkward, and overweight youth.

The guard surveyed the woods and then gave Blumenfeld a doubtful once over. "Don't go far," he warned. "We're not near the trails, but some people like to explore the forest."

Ronald's eyes became flat, like a shark's before it bit into its prey. Blumenfeld felt a chill, knowing those eyes were the last thing people saw before he killed them. The fate of anyone discovering a scientist wandering the forest in a lab coat would be a quick bullet between the eyes.

"I never go far," Blumenfeld assured him. "I don't want to get lost." He was terrified of getting lost. All of his hopes were predicated on the dog getting hungry enough to return to the vicinity of the RV.

"Okay. Enjoy." Ronald looked pleasant again and gave him a little military style wave as a sendoff. He shouldered his rifle and strolled back to do whatever the guards did all day, perhaps to do yet another perimeter check.

Blumenfeld felt an uncomfortable trickle of nervous sweat run down the side of his face. He wiped at it with his pudgy hand. His wedding ring scratched him. He winced and fingered it absently as he entered the woods and took the well-worn path he had created from his earlier searches.

Blumenfeld had always hated that ring, yet loved it at the same time. The heavy gold band with its five small diamonds always seemed an awkward weight. The small inscription on the inside, though, had kept him from jettisoning it entirely after his wife had passed away five years ago. *Out of many, I chose you.* It had been a constant reminder that his wife, a gorgeous brunette, could have had anyone, but she had settled for Blumenfeld. That reminder had kept him from the fate of most researchers. He hadn't immersed himself completely in his work, but had taken time for the special moments of their life, the moments that had become cherished memories. Without having had any children, those memories were all he had. Instead of being cherished now, though, they were painful reminders of an empty place in his heart, his soul, and his life.

Leaving some sort of legacy was his only goal now. He didn't want to be forgotten; turned into compost for the grass and maybe a bemused 'Remember that geeky scientist, the fat one?' asked by colleagues or muscle bound guards. If he saved the planet, at least the people in his secret organization would never forget Benjamin Blumenfeld. Sacrificing some animals and keeping quiet about the use of human test subjects seemed a small price to pay.

Ghosts from the Holocaust followed Blumenfeld for a few steps after that thought, but he brushed them aside impatiently. He had already made his peace with that internal guilt. He wasn't going to allow it to dissuade him from his work. They could go haunt the ones who had first injected a comatose man with the virus in a moment of scientific hubris and had launched the slow destruction of mankind. He needed to focus on finding that dog.

Chapter Eight

Wynd scowled at his phone and the pulsing blip that told him where he was in relation to his surroundings. He should have reached the Dao by now, he felt, and wondered anxiously if he was lost.

The rain had stopped. Everything smelled green and raindrops sparkled like diamonds where ever the sun peeked through the high canopy of pine, elm, and alder trees and dappled the forest floor. He had startled a rabbit earlier, had accidentally flushed birds from the undergrowth, and been abused verbally by squirrels that didn't approve of his intrusion into their territory.

Wet, sweaty, and dirty, Wynd didn't appreciate the vibrant nature all around him. Mosquitoes were making their presence known and brambles kept catching at his legs and slowing his progress. The need to walk quietly and to be cautious hampered his forward momentum as well, adding to his misery. His fear of accidentally circling back to the main trail to the Dao and meeting those men grew with every step. He was tempted to call Graymonger for help, but quickly discarded that idea as ridiculous. The man wouldn't be able to find him and it was still unclear if he was an innocent bystander or actively working with his targets. Wynd knew he only wanted to call him for company and emotional support. His pride roundly chastised him for it.

The sound of animals fighting stopped him in his tracks. He tried to identify them, but the sounds were faint. The sound rose and fell and then was silent. The songbirds began to sing again and a squirrel chattered.

"Don't move." The voice behind Wynd sounded old, male, and annoyed. Wynd quickly calculated his height by the sound of his voice. The man was shorter than him, but that didn't mean Wynd had the upper hand. "Reach back slowly and give me your phone."

Wynd didn't hesitate. Without the proper codes, his phone was worthless as a source of information about his true nature. A pudgy, cold hand took the phone from him.

“Take it and go,” Wynd told him. “You can have my bag too. You can leave and I won’t turn around.”

“GPS.”

“Yes.”

“Good.”

“Okay.”

There was a moment of silence and then the man asked, as if going against his better judgement, “Did you see a dog just a moment ago?”

“No, no dog.”

The man muttered a curse in Yiddish. He said angrily, “That dog is evil, I’m sure of it.”

Training told Wynd to talk to the man, make himself real to him, and gain his sympathy. The man wasn’t giving him anything to use, though, as a starting point. He was a faceless entity without a motive, a villain without a backstory in which to understand him. Wynd only knew he was looking for a dog, stealing his phone, and seemed pleased about the GPS app.

Staring at the small yellow flowers poking out of the forest loam Wynd dared to ask, “Are you lost?”

“Of course I’m lost!” the man snapped, but then after a snort. “Now I’m not, though. I have your GPS. The problem, dear, is what to do about you. I don’t personally get my hands dirty with these sorts of things.”

“Sorts of things?” Wynd prompted with dread.

“That dog!” the man snarled. “He purposefully gave me hope of capturing him and then led me into the forest until I was lost. I tripped and fell. Do you know what that damnable dog did?”

Wynd shook his head and his jewelry chimed together.

The man was suddenly at his ear. He felt a spike of adrenaline as the man growled, “He stole my turkey and rye sandwich... right out of my hand... He ran away with the bait. I didn’t even have time to taze him!” The last was said with a vicious fury.

Wynd trembled.

The man had a taser. He could use it and do as he liked to Wynd.

Wynd identified the faint smell of a turkey on rye sandwich coming from the man. He at least had taken a few bites before the dog had stolen it. It made Wynd nauseated.

Wood smoke reminded Wynd of his many nights spent in far flung places where electricity was rare, life was preserved through backbreaking labor, but family always gathered close at night to remember why living was worth it all. Rum and cinnamon reminded him of his father's aftershave. His mother loved rose scents. The earthy scent of Tibetan incense took Wynd back to pleasant, cold days spent herding long haired sheep and learning the intricacies of a little known dialect from the ethnic natives who spoke it. This was his first bad memory associated with a smell. He didn't think he would ever smell turkey on rye again without feeling the man's breath in his ear and the trepidation he felt waiting for the jolt of a taser.

"You're coming with me," the man told him matter-of-factly. "I'm not very good at threats, and I don't think I'm capable of killing someone, but I can cause you a great deal of pain. If you cooperate, I will soon turn you over to other people who will process you. Then, I can get back to my research. If you choose to resist, I will jamb this taser into your mouth and keep firing it until you decide to cooperate."

"What about the dog?"

The man wasn't expecting that question. He leaned close to Wynd's ear again and his hot breath on Wynd's skin and his turkey on rye smell made his stomach churn as the man warned, "Forget the dog!"

Wynd could hear fear in his voice. Something about the dog was important to him. Before he had a chance to move back again Wynd smelled something else underneath the turkey and rye scent. Animal urine, chemical scent, and... the man smelled like a lab. Wynd knew that smell intimately. The man wanted to get back to his research. He smelled like a lab that used animals. He was

chasing a dog. He was in the woods, at least a hundred miles from the nearest research lab. Wynd thought he had enough to form a strong informed opinion about the man holding him hostage and that his investigation was finally bearing fruit.

Wynd deliberately turned on his heel, his big soled boot digging into the wet, soft loam of the forest as he pivoted to face the man. Surprisingly, he had to abruptly look down. He wasn't used to men shorter than himself. The man was very short, round, and wearing a lab coat covered in dirt. He was unsteadily holding a taser and his phone in his hands as he tried to look at the GPS and decide his next move. Too late, he realized his danger. He dropped the phone and tried to bring the taser to bear on Wynd. His little brown eyes were furious and anxious at the same time. He wasn't certain about the outcome of a fight even with a slight man.

Wynd dodged him and began running, trusting his youth, agility, and stamina to outpace him and lose him in the forest. Thorny vines caught at his legs and branches whipped at his face as he stumbled on rocks and tree roots. He heard the man huffing and puffing behind him, cursing in Yiddish as he tried to negotiate the same obstacles with his older, ungainly body. He surprisingly managed to keep up for some time, but then he seemed to give up abruptly.

Wynd felt a surge of relief when he heard silence behind him, but he didn't slow down. His lungs burned and his heart beat painfully. The muscles in his legs were near their limit. He was fearful that he had become well and truly lost in the forest. That was its own danger, but better than the more immediate one of being kidnapped.

When he fell, it was so unexpected that the laboring breath in his lungs was expelled in his exclamation of shock. His elbows, ribs, and knees hit rocks and tangled in ivy. His face went through a large spider web, its large, splay legged inhabitant sitting suspended in mid-air. Wynd seemed to have an infinite amount of time to study its long dark legs, its yellow and black body,

and numerous small eyes, before time returned to normal and they were both falling into darkness.

“How could you possibly miss him?” Padilla fumed. He caressed the butt of his gun, wanting to take it out of its holster and shoot something, preferably the incompetent men who were admitting that a little Dao fag had given them the slip.

“He wasn’t on the trail,” Mercer replied. “He must have heard us.”

There was background conversation, his men trying to assign blame. Padilla cut them off. “Go to the Dao and talk to Looper. Give him the man’s description and have his people search. I want to know that he’s on the Dao grounds.”

“What about lunch?”

“What the fuck about it?” Padilla roared. “Do your job.”

“This isn’t actually our jobs, Rio.”

Padilla took a deep breath and then let it out slowly. He personally wanted to kill this man, slowly and painfully. He could imagine the bloody wreck that he would leave of the man so clearly he felt an adrenaline spike of pleasure. It was hard to talk through it, to not sound like a wolf enjoying its fresh kill, as he said, “You can get out anytime you want.”

Padilla almost hoped the man would take his offer. There wasn’t an out, actually, that didn’t involve a bullet in the head at the very least. Instead, he heard a grumbled swear word before Mercer said, “We get to clock out early then.”

“Agreed.”

“Okay. We’re on it, Rio.”

Padilla pocketed his cell just as he noticed the Reverend coming out of the woods. He looked exhausted, bent over and steps dragging as he stumbled out of the trees. He took his bearings and then started down the path that led through the tall grass and up the hill where Padilla was standing.

Padilla stepped back into the trees, letting the shadows and the tight cluster of tree trunks hide him from easy view. The smell of sap and wet forest filled his nostrils as he listened to the startled crows heralding the Reverend's approach. The never ending song of the cicadas and the songbirds was background noise to the eventual sound of the man's footsteps.

The priest looked as if he had been lost in the forest. Padilla studied him critically as he bent down, picked up his wet notebook, and shook off drops of water and pine needles. His clothing was stained and torn. His brown skin was pale and caked with dirt and his forehead looked smeared with the blood and body of a crushed mosquito that had feasted well before its demise. He looked utterly exhausted and angry as he dropped the notebook with an air of depressed finality and continued down the hill.

Strike didn't look as if he had made it to the Dao and romanced a lithesome member of the Dao. He didn't look like a man who had witnessed a revelation and was eager to tell someone. Besides looking depressed, he also looked bitter and angry in one haggard expression. If he had been looking for inspiration to fill the blank notebook, it was obvious he hadn't found it.

Padilla caressed the butt of his gun and came out of hiding to watch the man stumble a few times on the steep incline of the hill. Strike stopped at the Dao marker and stared for a long moment. Padilla frowned and popped the safety strap on his gun. He didn't know if it was needed, but he wasn't sure if they had made yet another mistake in an operation that should have been simple.

Strike's shoulders slumped even more and Padilla thought he heard a curse drift up the hill. The man continued on his way towards the church and Padilla was left to wonder what he had been staring at. Jeffie's missing scarf, or the cloth from the other Dao hippy? He couldn't be sure and he needed to be. Strike would be missed, but Padilla had ample proof of the man's religious hypocrisy. His parishioners might believe Strike had stolen the church funds and run off with a biker. Petula certainly would. She had been very vocal with

her doubts about the new priest's sincerity and even his parentage. She saw nothing of the old Reverend William's in his supposed son. Padilla didn't either, but that didn't matter. Even if he wasn't William's real son, Strike had stayed within the law, so far, and William's had lawfully left Strike everything he owned.

Padilla began walking down the hill, formulating a plan as he recalled the layout of the church, the home, and its office. He couldn't leave any evidence. He would have to walk the priest back into the forest until he reached the research RV. There they would take charge of him and add him to Padilla's quota. As much as Padilla wanted to make Strike suffer for giving him more work, any blood evidence might be questioned.

The grass moved up ahead and then a white husky mix with cinnamon colored ears, mask, and freckles appeared on the path. Padilla stopped walking and pulled out his gun, mindful of his men's concern about rabies in the area. This was probably the dog that had been getting into the Reverend's garbage.

The dog's blue eyed stare unnerved Padilla. He had learned to be superstitious from a grandmother who wore charms, one an amulet made of black jet shaped like a small fist and another, a glass eye in silver blessed by a priest. He had often instructed him about what caused bad luck and how to cleanse it from a person. Padilla had embraced his beliefs. A blue eyed dog was unnatural in his book and therefore very bad luck.

Padilla gave a half-hearted whistle, but he was nervous and failed to make it sound friendly. The dog's ears went back and it was suddenly gone. Padilla might have thought it had vanished into thin air, but the grass and the flowers were waving as it passed through them.

Padilla considered the portent. He decided it was something he couldn't ignore. He could feel the bad luck clinging to him. He needed to wash in salt water and get within the protection of his Nimbu-Mirchi Totka, the seven green chilies and lemon he had hanging in his home. Strike would have to wait. If he acted now, it could only end in disaster.

The young man had fallen down one of the many hidden caverns in the forest. Blumenfeld squinted down into the darkness. He couldn't see him, but he could hear his groan. He was still alive. Blumenfeld couldn't leave him like that.

Blumenfeld had been forced to chase after him, his terror of the entire operation being revealed due to his carelessness the driving force that had kept him running long after he thought his heart would fail him. Bent over with his hands on his shaking knees to keep himself from falling over in exhaustion, he now breathed like a bellows and his sweat ran down his face, making his numerous mosquito bites and scratches sting. He felt angry enough to commit murder, especially now when he couldn't see his victim.

Blumenfeld felt he couldn't hope to climb down without inadvertently falling. Somehow he would have to mount a devastating aerial assault.

There were large rocks and heavy broken branches. Blumenfeld wanted to balk at the manual labor required to dig them from their prisons of tree roots, underbrush, and new growth, but there wasn't anything else he could use effectively. With his bare hands and smaller tree branches, he pried at likely candidates for murder weapons.

The young man's cell phone rang with an orchestral sampling of music from a ridiculous pirate movie his deceased wife had been fond of. He pulled the cell out of his pocket and scowled at the icon of a young man with one eye. The reference was obvious. Graymonger; he even had a name that sounded like a pirate.

Blumenfeld turned off the cell and then realized his mistake. With a curse he tried to open the GPS. A login screen prompted him. With a louder curse, he threw the cell to the ground and then pulverized it into small bits with one of the larger rocks he had managed to pry out of a nest of tree roots.

Grunting with effort, Blumenfeld picked up the same large rock, carried it to the hole, and then threw it down into the darkness as hard as he could

manage. He didn't hear it connect but the groaning stopped. It didn't make him feel as satisfied as he would have liked. Instead, he felt a sick nausea tighten his gut. Bile rose in his throat. He spat aside, wiped at his mouth with a trembling hand, and then forced himself to get another rock. Now it was a matter of compassion, he told his guilty conscience. He was committed. If he left now and the young man still lived, he would only suffer.

Blumenfeld picked through his choice of large rocks. Covered in dirt and clinging tendrils from roots, only a few had edges sharp enough to do more than blunt force trauma. He chose one larger than the rest that had an edge that looked carved by a Neanderthal. If that were true, his cave man ancestor had probably used it for the same purpose. Blumenfeld imagined it a million year old murder weapon as he heaved it off the ground and began carrying it with difficulty towards the hole.

The ground was still slippery from the rain. It was hard to keep his footing as he reached the hole and lifted the rock over his head with a grunt of tremendous effort. He stayed poised like that, knowing that when the rock connected the young man would surely die. Blumenfeld felt almost godlike, the fate of a human in his hands. It was the most powerful feeling he had ever had in his life. He felt himself savoring it even as his wrists began to shake from the effort of holding the rock. In a move calculated to do the most damage, he turned the rock in his hands to place the sharp point beneath it.

A low growl startled him. It was not the growl of a dog. It was deep and ended in a definite cat like hiss. Blumenfeld looked up and saw a mountain lion only a few yards away, poised to begin a run that would end in Blumenfeld's death. The raised rock had given it pause, though, and the growl was displeasure that its prey was being unexpected. Strangely, its tawny fur was spotted with blood, as if it had been in some sort of fight. One of its ears was ragged at the end and covered in fresh blood. It hissed again and barred long fangs at Blumenfeld.

Blumenfeld's body made decisions for him. His legs began scrambling in an

effort to turn and run while his mind was still mesmerized by his proximity to death. His shoes were meant for office hallways, though, and the soft pile of carpeting. His feet slid in opposite directions and he began falling. Blumenfeld heard the sickening snap of his ankle only a millisecond before the rock, falling out of his hands as his world upended, landed solidly on his head point first.

Flat on the ground now and bleeding out from the jagged wound in his head, Blumenfeld felt himself being sucked into a dark void of nothingness. The rumble of the mountain lion sounded near his ear. Blumenfeld had fleeting, confused thoughts about God's retribution for evil deeds, his missed chance for posterity, and the odds of being eaten by a beast of prey after a death blow by a large boulder, when he smelled turkey on rye on the beast's breath. He laughed, brief and sharp, just as the beast went for his throat.

End of book one

Sample of Gone with the Wynd, Book Two coming out in

April 2019

Night Wynd

Chapter One

The knock on Peter's door was the last thing he wanted. His notes, covered in the plagiarized sermon of a great man, were stacked neatly on his kitchen table. Sitting at the table, he drank a beer and slowly flipped through them as he tried to memorize it. Part of the con, after all, was to sound legitimate.

Peter toyed with the idea of pretending he wasn't at home, but a voice shouted, "I know you're in there! Where's Wynd, you bastard!"

The man's accent was richly British and he sounded as if he were delivering lines from a Shakespearean play. Peter almost expected to be called knave or scoundrel. The man's next words, though, were hardly Queen's

English.

“I’m going to break down this fucking door and pull your ass out of your mouth if you don’t open it right the fuck now!”

Peter stood up and moved to the door. It was shaking under a pounding fist now, the hinges of the open screen squeaking and the glass in the door vibrating as if it was about to break at any moment.

“Wynd’s not here!” Peter shouted back. “He left hours ago to return to the Dao.”

“Liar! He isn’t there and I didn’t find him on the trail.”

Peter was suddenly worried himself. “His marker was gone from the Dao flag.”

“You know that, do you?” the man thundered. “Then what was to stop you from taking it yourself? Did you kill him and Jeffie? Are they planted among your petunias, you bastard? If you don’t answer the door I’m going to take your shovel and start digging up every fresh mound I see.”

“I didn’t plant petunias!”

The man didn’t threaten to call the police. A member of the Dao, he probably didn’t expect a sympathetic ear if he contacted them, Peter guessed. If he had met Padilla, or his female dead-eye deputy, he was probably of the same mind as Strike, to stay well clear of them.

“You’re threatening me!” Strike shouted back. “Of course I won’t open the door.”

“I want answers!” the man replied. “I promise not to beat the shit out of you if you provide them.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“Are you questioning my honor?”

“Yes.”

“Fuck you! All right then, I’m going to dig. It’s on you, mate!”

“Wait, are you Graymonger?”

“That’s the name, but lot good it will do you if you call the police. It’s not

real.”

“I’m not stupid. Look, Wynd said you were asking for what he didn’t want to give. Maybe that was his way of saying you attacked him. Maybe you killed him and you’re trying to put the blame on me?”

“Don’t be an ass! I never laid a hand on him. He’s a saint to me. Maybe I play the rogue, but I’m really not.”

“Fucking—likely— story.”

Graymonger made a frustrated sound and then admitted, “I’m straight, all right? You can trust my intentions are honorable, unlike yours.”

Strike was speechless and felt uncomfortable, but then he realized he was being conned. “You’re a fucking liar!”

“I’m getting the shovel!” Graymonger pounded both fists on the door and then walked away. Strike could hear the bang of the shed doors a few moments after that. Next, Strike heard the sound of metal over gravel as Graymonger dragged a shovel towards the flower beds.

Strike was nervous but he had worked hard on those beds and he was just as concerned about Wynd as Graymonger. He cautiously opened the door and discovered that Graymonger had torn the screen door. Anger at the destruction made him brave. He stormed out indignantly and followed in Graymonger’s steps. He caught up with the man halfway to the flower beds.

Graymonger stopped but didn’t look back as Strike shouted, “I’m telling the truth. Stop being a dumb-ass and let’s find out where he is.”

“You care?” Graymonger looked over his shoulder with a skeptical expression.

“Yes, I do.”

Graymonger turned then and righted the shovel. He leaned on it. “When did you last see him and where was he headed?”

To be continued....

Excerpt from my Tapping Darkness: available in paperback and kindle:

CHAPTER ONE

Ajay was a big man and built solid. He spent time at the gym, and it showed in the roll of his broad shoulders under his long black coat and in the solid stride of his muscled legs as he ran. That size worked against him now as he tangled with pedestrians. Struggling to avoid a hotdog vendor, Ajay barely missed running into a homeless man pushing a shopping cart full of aluminum cans.

“Stop, Pokestas!” Ajay shouted in anger and frustration.

The man Ajay was pursuing shouted back, “Like hell!” He punctuated his words by making a crude sign over one shoulder.

With a cardboard box clutched possessively under one arm and his seedy jacket and filthy scarf flapping like demented pigeon wings around his narrow frame, Pokestas negotiated the crowded city sidewalk with the boneless agility of an eel. The row-on-row of old store fronts and turn of the century apartment buildings made a wall on one side. The rush-hour bumper-to-bumper traffic made yet another kind of barrier, blocking his escape.

“You’ve got nowhere to go!” Ajay shouted over the heads of the crowd, hoping it was true.

“I do so!” Pokestas shouted back as he vaulted a low bench covered in snow, slithered along a car hood, and tried to breach the wall of cars and trucks at a standstill in traffic.

“I know where you live!” Ajay snarled as he dared to try and follow him.

“I know where you live, too!” Pokestas laughed.

Ajay wove in and out of the cars, risking crushing injuries as he climbed, slid, and sidestepped as fast as he could manage between bumpers.

“Ajay!”

That familiar voice brought Ajay’s head around but only for long enough to

identify his foster father behind the wheel of his old yellow cab.

“Hi, Da!” Ajay called back but didn’t slow his steps as he explained, “Working, now! Talk, later.”

Ajay slipped on a patch of snow and splashed into a puddle of freezing water as he reached the opposite side of the street. Almost going headlong into a street sign, he caught at the post with black gloved hands, used it to regain his balance, and pushed off as he propelled himself forward.

“Pokestas!” Ajay shouted between panting breaths that smoked in the cold air. “Stop, or I’ll—”

“What’re you gonna do, No Badge Kavanagh?” the man shouted back with a wild laugh of derision.

The man turned as he ran to waggle now empty bony fingers at Ajay, his narrow face split with a wide grin.

“Damn it!” Ajay swore. He stopped dead in his tracks, turned on his heel, and looked frantically back the way they had come.

An overfull garbage can, a too-narrow steam vent, and a covered sewer grate were all discarded as possibilities in a split-second of logical consideration. The garbage truck with the open rear parked at the curb was a more chilling prospect. As it began crushing its contents with loud grating and popping noises, Ajay eliminated it with relief as having been too far away from the fleeing man.

In a swirl of black coat and flying snowflakes, Ajay turned and began running after the man again, certain he had been tricked somehow. “Pokestas! Stop!”

Pokestas threw a startled look over his narrow shoulder and began running at top speed once more. He had gained ground during Ajay’s confusion, and he didn’t look as if he was tiring. Ajay, on the other hand, felt the burn that told him he was nearing his limit. It was only fury keeping his legs moving at that point and a determination not to let Pokestas get away with his box.

It was a crack in the sidewalk that made Pokestas stumble and almost go down. The time it took for him to recover was time enough for Ajay to catch him hard by one arm, propel him into an ally, and shove him up against a stinking garbage dumpster.

“Ajay!” Pokestas exclaimed as he tried on a confused, good-natured smile. His body was a coiled spring under Ajay’s hands though; and the box tucked into his jacket was clutched possessively. Strangely, almost every one of the man’s fingers was bandaged.

“Pokestas!” Ajay almost purred, leaning over the skinny man threateningly. “I’ve heard you’ve been making some illegal sales again. That true?”

“Me? Ajay! I gave all that up for religion, remember?” Pokestas insisted with an attempt at an innocent expression.

Ajay grinned without any humor, his dark blue eyes hard under his windblown, black hair. “Funny, but I don’t remember seeing you at mass.”

“Wouldn’t you have to be there to see me?” Pokestas retorted, dropping innocence for a sneer of contempt.

“Keep it coming, Pokestas!” Ajay growled as he held the man’s ragged coat lapel in one fist while he ripped open the box. “Your cell mates will think you’re a riot. Maybe they won’t—”

Needle sharp teeth sank through leather into the flesh of Kavanagh’s hand. He howled in pain as a white toy poodle covered in pink ribbons and painted with pink nail polish snarled as if it were a dog ten times its size and fearlessly defended itself.

“You can have the damned monster!” Pokestas exclaimed as he suddenly flipped the box out of his coat at Ajay.

Ajay released him in pain and surprise as he frantically tried to catch the box before it and the dog hit the pavement. Pokestas took advantage of that opportunity and bolted for the street.

“God damn it! Stop!” Ajay shouted, meaning both Pokestas and the dog as

he held the box close to his chest and tried to get a hold of the biting poodle. “It’s okay pooch! I’m the good guy! Son of a... Look, you little—! I’m trying to save you!”

Finally, Ajay resorted to stuffing the dog back into the box, shutting the lid, and wrapping his arms around it to hold it closed. He leaned against the old brick wall then, feeling the throb of bitten hands, the cold from his wet pants and shoes, and the burn of overworked lungs as he tried to catch his breath.

“What’re you gonna do, No Badge Kavanagh?” Pokestas’ words still rang in Ajay’s ear, the inescapable truth in them giving Ajay’s triumph a bitter aftertaste.

Ajay’s badge had been gone for months now, taken away by a police department that had lost too many cases due to Ajay’s failure to follow procedures. He hadn’t faulted them. A court of law needed proper evidence, not Ajay’s good intentions. Those good intentions hadn’t been enough to convict criminals.

Despite failure, Ajay hadn’t been able to forget his dream of being a good detective. He was limited now to gathering evidence as a civilian and presenting that evidence to the police or a client for further action. He wasn’t supposed to chase suspects through dangerous traffic or to confront them nose to nose without a gun or police authority to back him up. Pokestas had known that and would have been within his rights to have Ajay arrested for assault. That is, if he hadn’t been holding onto a stolen dog at the time.

The camera, recorder, and notepad in Ajay’s coat pockets had all been brought along to catch Pokestas in the act and to make a case to put him behind bars. With the image of a grief-stricken Mrs. Anthony in his mind though and confronted by the man taking the elderly woman’s most cherished pet, Ajay had thrown all procedure to the wind in an instant. Just like in the past, it had become all about a criminal and stopping him from hurting an innocent.

Ajay cursed at his lack of discipline as he finally pushed away from the wall and carried his box filled with the still snarling poodle back to his client. Maybe he hadn't put a criminal behind bars, he thought; but he could still feel good about closing his case and saving the dog from being sold illegally.

Ajay found it hard to hold onto that good feeling a little while later. After returning Mrs. Anthony's beloved poodle, she tearfully thanked him for rescuing her dog and then paid him with a cookie, a cup of milk, and a long story about her grandchildren. When she saw him to the door afterward, she said as she reached up to pat his cheeks as if he were four years old, "You are such a good boy, Ajay. I can see why your father is so proud of you." Ajay couldn't find it within himself to insist on something more monetary.

In a part of the city where everyone had lived in the same homes for generations, it wasn't a surprise to Ajay that his father managed to know so many people. If his cab stopped long enough, people gathered and talked through his window. If he was done for the day, his seat at the local bar was sacrosanct and surrounded by friends. At church, he and his family had their place on pews that had sat generations of Kavanaghs before them. Ajay could imagine his father saying to the many people he knew: I am so proud of my boy. It was harder to understand why.

After his failure as a police detective, Ajay had taken on crime singlehandedly by protecting his little community with all the unrealistic and unofficial determination of a superhero. If he had managed that with any amount of success, he might have agreed with his father. Unfortunately, Ajay was still more likely to end up without a conviction in most of his cases. That was a failure rate he was finding impossible to be proud of or to accept.

His bank account was also finding it hard to accept. Ajay didn't get paid for failures. On the long walk back to his office, hunched into his long coat against a light snowfall, Ajay considered his lack of finances. He wasn't certain whether he was going to be able to pay the rent on his office or his apartment. It was a safe bet that neither of his landlords would accept milk and cookies as

payment.

His father wouldn't stay proud of him if he lost his agency, Ajay thought with mounting depression. Nor would he stay proud of him if Ajay moved back home and couldn't manage his life. Whatever noble aspirations the man attributed to Ajay's choice in careers would surely be lost under the glare of harsh reality and failure. Still, when Ajay pushed aside those worries about what his father might think of him, he could still find that strong desire to succeed; to really make a difference. Imagining another line of work—another direction in his life—just wasn't a choice Ajay wanted to make. Stay on course, he told himself. Man up and make it work somehow.

As Ajay joined a group of people waiting for a street light to change at a busy intersection and considered the humiliating prospect of begging his landlords for more time, his thoughts were interrupted by an unusual tinkling noise. It cut through the noise of traffic and pedestrians by the very nature of its oddness and the fact it seemed to be coming from the very spot where he was standing.

Ajay looked down and discovered a man was standing very close to him in the press of pedestrians. Ajay was used to towering over people, but this young man was far shorter than most. The top of his head barely reached Ajay's collarbone; and though wrapped in a thick white coat and an overlarge, cream colored scarf, he still didn't appear to weigh much more than a hundred pounds.

The man's long blonde braid, small gold earrings, snug cream-colored pants, and ankle boots might have made some people mistake the man for a woman; but his arching gold eyebrows, his intelligent blue eyes, and his high-boned face were definitely masculine. He had a firm chin as well and a stance that was almost challenging, telling Ajay he was well aware of Ajay but pointedly ignoring his scrutiny. His frigid expression spoke of someone who was used to comments of the rude kind and expected one at any moment.

The signal changed and they began crossing the street, the young man

walking quickly ahead of Ajay as if he were eager to put distance between them. Ajay's eyes followed him, reflexively noting details as if he might be called to testify about the young man later. It was a reflex that made him a good investigator but tended to make people nervous.

The young man was well off, if the leather and costly jewelry he was wearing was any indication, and definitely not from that part of the city. As Ajay kept making mental notes, he passed over the exact spot where he had been born without the slightest tingle of recognition; his entire attention was on the handsome young man in front of him.

Warrenburg and Devoe Streets were the veritable x marks the spot at the center of Ajay Kavanagh's life. He had been born at that crossroads in a cab stuck in rush hour traffic to a free-spirited mother and an unknown father. Her midwife had been the cab driver; a ham-handed, overworked father of eleven children. The mother had left him with the newborn as soon as she had caught her breath enough to pay for the cab ride and to—incredibly—walk away, never to be heard from again.

Adding a newborn to his clan had been as perfunctory as taking in a stray puppy. Handing the newborn into his harried wife's arms, the cab driver had only announced, "Another one," and sat down to a beer and the evening news. A more official adoption and twenty-five years later, Ajay was still treated no differently than any of his foster brothers and sisters by his foster parents or the people in their tight knit community.

Ajay was known as Michael Kavanagh's son. His face and family were well known to all. Ajay had learned to make that familiarity work for him. He knew the people. He knew every sag, stain, and warped roof line of the long line of Victorian era apartment buildings, single family homes, old businesses, and decrepit office buildings in his small part of the city. When he realized the young man walking ahead of him was obviously lost and looking for an address, it was easy to use his knowledge to consider which address the man might be searching for.

Turning down Caraway Street, the choices became fewer. The man didn't look in need of a used book, a bail bondsman, or a watch repair. The only other buildings were small time businesses that had magnetic signs inside dirty windows as the only advertisement of their existence.

The young man stared hard at a note in his hand, studied several signs, and then looked frustrated as he passed them by. He stopped at the next building, looked even more frustrated, and then turned back around. Returning to the previous sign, he studied it and his note in obvious confusion.

"Uh, that's actually a six," Ajay said quietly from behind him and reached over the smaller man's shoulder to turn the errant magnetic number around. "Eighteen twenty-six, not nine."

The man's blue eyes were startled as he turned warily and looked up at Ajay. He regained his composure almost instantly though and stood straighter as he gave Ajay a firm nod and a curt, "Thank you."

Ajay didn't blame him. The young man was definitely not used to such a rundown area; and a man much bigger than him had, to all appearances, followed him. It wasn't a good time to look like an easy mark. Ajay had to struggle not to smile in amusement. The man reminded him of Mrs. Anthony's poodle: tiny, all done up in ribbons and bows, but still as fierce as any Doberman.

"I have an office here," Ajay told him, trying to reassure the man.

"Oh, I see. Well, thank you."

The tinkling sound came from a small golden ball hanging among the many golden necklaces on the man's neck. Something inside the ball chimed like tiny bells with every motion the man made as he cautiously edged out of Ajay's shadow.

Opening the front door, the man entered the building and then paused in the narrow lobby to check door numbers. Not finding the number he was looking for, he began climbing up the stairs to the second floor. Ajay knew he

wasn't putting the man's fears to rest when he followed him upstairs to a long hallway leading to more offices.

There were three offices there: a women's clinic, a divorce lawyer, and Ajay's own office. The lawyer had an actual plaque on his door, the women's services had a sign written by hand, and his office door was unmarked. Ajay relied on his phone for business and leaving business cards all over the city. He almost always met his clients at their home or place of business. Because of that, a door sign was something he didn't need, and it was an expense he hadn't been able to afford.

Ajay's office door was open at the moment, and he could hear someone complaining inside. The young man looked in and asked the occupant, "Is this the Ajay Kavanagh Investigations Agency?"

There was a familiar snort of laughter, and a feminine voice replied, "This is it, handsome. He's not in right now though. Any female services I can help you with?"

"Katie!" Ajay exclaimed in annoyance.

"Shit! Well, looks like Ajay is here after all. Just my bad luck, I guess."

The young man looked from the office interior to Ajay with an expression of disappointment. His next words were said in the tone of a man who suspected he had wasted his time. "I'm sorry. I seem to have been misled."

"I'll say!" Katie snickered as she came out of the office with a box of paperclips. She was a short woman with black hair cut in a severe buzz cut. Her loose shirt and old jeans did nothing to reveal she was a medical doctor with eight years' experience under her belt. Her dark eyes were as sharp as her tongue as she raked Ajay with them and said, "You could do a lot better at the local day-labor pool."

"Ha, ha," Ajay growled irritably. He was used to her sharp tongue and mercenary ways, but the last thing Ajay needed just then in front of a prospective new client was her joking put-downs. Partly because he wasn't sure she was joking.

“Are you going to pay for those paperclips, Dr. Malevona?” Ajay wondered acidly.

She sniffed as she waved the box at him and began walking to her office. “It’s charity, Kavanagh. You just gave to the cause. Accept it graciously.”

She donated her medical services to the poor and supported herself in ways Ajay had never been able to discover. She did often run low on supplies. Small filches from his office were common; more so after the lock on the door had been broken.

The young man was beginning to leave. Ajay stepped sideways into his path and tried not to look threatening as he quickly said, “I hope you understand that she’s joking? I assure you, I am a competent investigator. I have one year on the police force and several solved cases to my credit. If you need references, I can provide them.” Ajay hoped he wouldn’t ask for them. They had all been very small cases.

The man looked uncertain, the address clutched tightly in his hand. Ajay couldn’t help holding his breath and offering up a silent prayer. It was answered when the man suddenly made up his mind and held out his hand to shake Ajay’s. His golden bracelets chimed together as he introduced himself. “My name is Devon Temple.”

“Detective Ajay Kavanagh,” Ajay replied with relief. He returned the man’s handshake firmly and then used his grip to lead the man into his office.

Motioning Temple to take a seat in a chair with a taped-up seat positioned before his old desk, Ajay moved around the desk and sat in a chair that wasn’t in much better shape. As he sat, he swept his dust-covered laptop off of the desk and into a drawer. He wished he could do the same for the dead plants that had failed to get enough light from a filthy window and the obvious places where the plaques of previous tenants had once graced the wall. It made Ajay’s one diploma from the police academy look inadequate.

Taking out a notepad and a well-used pencil, Ajay felt the need to say defensively, “I assure you that I am a complete professional and that my rates

are very reasonable. May I ask who recommended me?”

“Samantha Engles,” Temple told him as he looked around the room with the air of someone ready to leave again at the slightest provocation. “She told me you were an excellent investigator—the best actually—and she was certain you could help us.”

“Us?” Ajay wrote the woman’s name down. He had never heard her name before, and he didn’t know anyone who would use the best and his name in the same sentence.

“Ms. Engles and I share a common need to know where a certain man has gone,” Temple explained. “He disappeared a week ago, and no one has heard a word from him since. While it isn’t unusual behavior for him, I’m afraid he left at a very bad time. He’s on the verge of becoming a famous artist, you see. His debut is in several weeks. Many important people are to appear. If he doesn’t attend, I’m not sure he will get another chance any time soon. He’s rather eccentric, and his art is controversial.”

“So a crime hasn’t been committed?” Ajay affirmed. “He’s just missing?”

“That’s right.”

“Is he likely to be in the city?” Ajay wondered as he made notes quickly.

“I’m not sure,” Temple replied as he fiddled nervously with his golden braid. “He has a habit of disappearing for days, but he never tells me where he’s been when he returns.”

“What is your concern in this?” Ajay wondered.

Temple frowned. “Does that matter?”

“It does if this person doesn’t want you to find him. It could make my job more difficult,” Ajay explained as he made a note that Temple had appeared confused rather than defensive about the question.

The young man looked uncomfortable, and then he replied tentatively as if he expected a negative response from Ajay, “I’m his model. He paints me.”

“Interesting line of work,” Ajay replied, keeping his voice neutral even though his interest was piqued. “Does it pay well?”

Temple's lips thinned, disapproving perhaps of being questioned about personal things. He replied with a small shrug, "It can sometimes."

"I suppose not having works of art—with you as the subject—make an appearance at an important art show might hurt your career and your finances?" Ajay asked.

"It's not about money, Mr. Kavanagh, and I'm not worried about my career as a model," Temple retorted with sudden temper. "David Ridder is important to me."

"Is that the artist's name?"

"Yes."

Ajay made more notes. "What about Ms. Engles? What's her concern in all of this?"

"She's David's agent," Temple replied. "She manages his appearances."

"You mean his one appearance?"

"Well, yes. This is the only one so far," Temple replied impatiently. "It's his debut." He placed a flyer on Ajay's desk showing a brooding young man with dark, curling hair and information about the art show listed beneath his picture.

"She's worried about her commission?" Ajay wondered as he took the flyer and studied it.

"I suppose," Temple replied. "Though I'm sure she's worried about David as well. She's worked hard to get him ready for this show. She wants him to be finally acknowledged for the great artist he is."

"This Ridder doesn't seem very appreciative," Ajay pointed out, looking up from the flyer to watch Temple's expression. "Why would he run out on his big chance at fame?"

"He's..." Temple frowned, searching for words, and then settled on, "Special. He's a man of the moment. I don't think that material things concern him at all. He only cares about his painting. It is possible he simply wanted a place to paint without interruption and left without thought for the

consequences.”

“Sounds like a hard man to deal with,” Ajay commented as he put down the flyer, finished his notes, and then flipped his notebook closed. “It makes it easier for me.”

“How is that?” Temple wondered.

“He won’t have covered his tracks if he simply hopped a plane or a bus and took off for parts unknown.”

“You’re right,” Temple agreed, looking hopeful. “I can’t imagine him caring about subterfuge.”

“I’ll need access to his home,” Ajay said as he stood up. “That is, if you’re hiring me?”

Temple frowned, looking Ajay up and down thoughtfully. “You do seem professional.” His eyes swept the rundown office with distaste and he asked, “If you are that good, I fail to see why you are working in these conditions. To be honest, it doesn’t inspire confidence.”

“I only take certain cases,” Ajay told him truthfully, “and that limits my financial portfolio unfortunately.”

“Certain cases?” Temple echoed, arching a golden eyebrow.

“You would be surprised at how many people want an investigator to get the dirt on someone for a court case, or revenge, or simply misplaced curiosity. I like to take cases for good reasons. It’s a sign of the times, I suppose, that many of those kinds of cases don’t come my way often enough.”

“You’re altruistic,” Temple said with a pleased smile. “That is very rare.”

Temple stood as well and shook Ajay’s hand. “You’re hired, Detective Kavanagh. But I warn you; if you don’t have any results for me in a very limited time, I will terminate our association and hire someone else.”

“Understood. When can I see Ridder’s home?”

“Tomorrow morning,” Temple replied. He plucked Ajay’s worn pencil out of his hand and wrote the address on the reverse side of his crumpled address note. He handed pencil and note to Ajay and said, “Eight sharp.”

“Eight sharp, it is.”

Ajay traded the address for one of his business cards. He then watched the handsome man go, leaving behind the slight scent of his cologne. Ajay found himself unconsciously breathing it in deeply.

Katie stuck her head into his office soon after and found Ajay still standing there looking thoughtful. “Well?” she asked gruffly. “Who the hell was Good Looking?”

“A client,” Ajay told her, coming back to himself and sitting down.

She grinned. “Good. That means you can afford to donate some copy paper.”

“I don’t have a copier,” Ajay pointed out.

“Then get one and donate,” Katie retorted. “Look, if I can’t rely on you to... Jeez! Kavanagh!”

Ajay blinked at her dumbly, his thoughts having wandered back to his new client again. “What?”

“I thought you were asexual all of this time, and now I find out you’re gay.”

Ajay scowled in confusion. “What the hell are you talking about?”

Katie snickered at him and said as she ducked back out of his office, “You’re gay and clueless. What a moron!”

Temple was a good looking man, Ajay told himself. But his interest in him was only limited to how he might fit into the mystery of Ridder’s disappearance. Katie was crazy to read anything else into it. Besides, he thought sourly, he had never swung that way in his preference...even though his few relationships with women had been rather unmitigated disasters.

“I think I would know if I were gay,” Kavanagh grumbled to the empty office.

“Clueless!” Katie shouted as if she had heard him. He doubted she had.

Ajay decided to ignore her. He had a big case to solve now. He needed to focus; not get distracted by ridiculous supposition on his sexual orientation or

the uncommonly handsome appearance of his client.

Two cases required paperwork. Ajay scribbled names on the tabs of two manila folders. Tossing his old notes into the one marked Mrs. Anthony, he then put it along with Devon Temple's empty folder into a drawer. There were only three other folders there starting to gather dust. Not enough to warrant a filing cabinet yet, but Ajay held out for the hope of a someday soon. There also hadn't been enough cases even remotely serious enough to warrant the use of his laptop.

Closing the file drawer, Ajay opened the one where he had stashed the laptop. Wiping the dust off with a sleeve, he recalled his father giving it to him as a gift on the day he had started his detective agency. He hadn't admitted to his father that he almost never used a computer. Paper and pencil always seemed to order his thoughts much more effectively.

He would take the computer with him and use it on this case, Ajay decided as he tucked it under one arm and decided to call it a day. It was time to take his professionalism up a notch with this case; a case that might make or break his career.

Ajay's home was on the top floor of a building that had once been owned by a wealthy family. Its many bedrooms had been converted into one room apartments. Other than that renovation, Ajay doubted it had seen much more than a coat of paint since the turn of the century. The plumbing was ancient; the pipes painted over a thousand times and snaking along the outside walls. Heating was from an ancient radiator, and a window air conditioner was the only relief in the hot summer months. The rent was cheap though, and Ajay couldn't complain about the neighbors. Most of them were elderly and quiet.

Ajay had furnished his place with donations from his family and a trip to the local Salvation Army. The couch was a flowery affair with tired springs,

and the kitchen table was a folding card table with an edge torn off and some mismatched chairs. The bed folded out of the couch and had a dip on one side where many guests had spent uncomfortable nights at his parent's home. A straight-backed chair, the only sound piece of furniture he owned, was for his infrequent guests.

Ajay tossed his coat over the chair back along with his tie before he made his way into the kitchenette. That consisted of an old enamel sink, a small refrigerator that rattled and hummed, and a stove he never used. His limited kitchen didn't bother Ajay though. His minimal cooking skills usually barred him from anything more complicated than putting frozen food into a battered microwave to defrost and making coffee.

Making coffee became Ajay's first priority. He put his laptop aside on the tile counter while coffee began filling the chipped decanter. Ajay leaned on the counter and played with his big coffee mug. His thoughts were on the case. He wanted to be prepared when he met Temple. He didn't want the man to have any doubts he was a professional and that he hadn't made a mistake by choosing him.

The manner of that choice puzzled Ajay though. Why a perfect stranger, Samantha Engles, had recommended him was definitely a line of questioning he intended to pursue when he interviewed her in his investigation. Ajay's business was strictly local. Knowing his clients well since childhood, he could positively say that none of them had contacts with agents in the art world. That left cases from his days on the force. The name Engles didn't ring any bells.

The coffee finished. Ajay poured himself a cup, tucked his laptop under one arm, and then left his apartment for the one next door. He didn't bother knocking as he swept in, announcing loudly, "I've got a case, Weasel!"

A skinny young man thrashed in surprise, headphones flying as he spun around in a swivel office chair. He glared at Ajay from under a mop of unruly red hair. Freckles stood out sharply on his face as he shouted furiously,

“Knock, god damn it! Is that too much to ask?”

Behind the man, a bank of sophisticated looking computers was arranged on a long table. Their screens were showing different websites, one of them pornographic. Ajay reached past him and put his laptop on top of the keyboards. “I need some research, Weasel.”

“Wezel, god damns it! I told you to stop using that nickname,” the man shouted furiously as he firmly put Ajay’s laptop aside. “I’m not twelve anymore. I’m freak’n twenty-two. I’m not using that piece of crap from the stone-age either. You want something, I use my gear. I want to get paid too. No more IOUs.”

“You know I’m good for it,” Ajay replied in a dismissive tone.

“Yeah, yeah,” the young man agreed with a sneer. “You always pay eventually, but that’s not the point! I don’t like waiting for months.”

“It won’t be months this time,” Ajay promised. “I have a paying client.”

Wezel looked skeptical, but he turned to his computers with a resigned sigh. “If you weren’t my cousin...”

Ajay snagged a chair and pulled it close to the computers. As he sat down in it, he dug into a breast pocket and pulled out his notebook and well-used pencil. Wezel rolled his eyes in exasperation.

“He uses paper,” Wezel lamented as he searched for the name Ajay now gave him. “Doesn’t own an iPhone or a Blackberry...he just uses paper. Why did you even bother bringing the laptop?”

“It looks professional,” Ajay replied absently as he watched information and photos appear on the computer monitors. “You can show me how to use it later.”

“And I’ll charge for the lessons too.” Wezel warned but then grunted and asked, “Who’s Pretty Boy? He’s a model? Why’s a male model need your help?”

An online portfolio had sprung up on a monitor. Temple was shown in very flattering poses with a short bio and contact information at the bottom of the screen. There was a list of previous jobs. There were a few references for

photography modeling, but most were modeling jobs for paintings.

“Likes artists, I guess,” Wezel muttered as he pulled up a second page. Temple was prominent there in several pieces of art.

Temple was a very beautiful man. Ajay found his eyes lingering far more on the portrait of the man standing with his hair let loose and a white, linen sheet wrapped around him seductively than any of the others. He might look good walking a beach or straddling a motorcycle in black leather; but simply wrapped in a sheet, he seemed to be revealing much more of an honest, open expression—a glimpse of who Devon Temple might really be. Daring and seductive, yet soft too; the small quirk at the corner of his mouth seemed to say he wasn't a person who took things too seriously.

Wezel repeated irritably, “I asked, why's he need your help?”

Ajay pulled his eyes away from the screen and blinked at his cousin. It seemed hard to bring his mind to order enough to answer the question. “He needs me to solve a missing person case.”

“That's pretty big stuff for small time Kavanagh,” Wezel pointed out. “It just doesn't seem possible someone would want you for something like this. Who recommended you?”

“This person,” Ajay replied as he handed over the note with Engles' name.

As Wezel went to work on a new search, Ajay had to wonder at his odd feeling of disappointment as Temple's picture left the screen to be replaced by search results for Samantha Engles. What was wrong with him? Was it the man's unusual good looks, or was it just gratitude for being given the chance to work a big case? Whatever it was, Ajay decided he had to put it out of his mind. A case like this needed his complete focus. He couldn't allow any clue to go unnoticed because of distracting elements.

“She needs a new web designer,” Wezel commented critically. “Her website is full of fuzzy photographs and bad hype. It's definitely bush league stuff.”

Ajay frowned in confusion. “My client described her as an important person with contacts.”

Wezel shrugged. "Sometimes people don't get how important the web is." He pulled up more search results and then whistled appreciatively. "Now we're talking important, Kavanagh! Here are some news articles. She's schmoozing in this picture with Paul Bale, Mayor of our fair city. That's Bashing Virgins in this picture. They're a very popular rock band, in case you didn't know...and you probably didn't."

"Never heard of them," Ajay replied impatiently. "Are they her clients?"

"No, she's just hanging with them at this benefit," Wezel told him. "Hang with the mayor and you hang with a lot of other important people."

"I need her client list, not her meetings with who's who," Ajay replied impatiently. "Go back to her web page."

Wezel complied. But after a brief search he admitted, "Only a few artists are listed. I've never heard of them. She rocks with rock stars, schmoozes with mayors, and has artist dweebs as clients."

"Find me David Ridder," Ajay asked as he scribbled notes.

"He's not on her client list...at least not here," Wezel told him. Then, after more searches and a few false leads, he shrugged and admitted, "Nothing. Do you know how hard it is not to be on the web?"

"So, he's not known," Ajay concluded. "He isn't in any online news articles, hasn't made any appearances, and no one has talked about him in any context."

"He also doesn't have a blog and isn't listed anywhere under his real name," Wezel added. "That doesn't mean he isn't there. It just means he's not using David Ridder."

"How hard is that?" Ajay wanted to know.

Wezel snickered as he googled Ajay. A dozen things popped up. "Even if someone talks about you, you're on the web...even if you're not. Understand?"

Ajay's service as a policeman popped up along with a few comments on Wezel's blog, a few insults from an ex-girlfriend on her blog, and several old newspaper articles.

“Oh, look!” Wezel chuckled. “When you were seven, you saved a kitten from a drain pipe.”

“I get your point,” Ajay said, making more notes. “My missing person is an extreme hermit.”

“To be that much of a clean slate, he must not know anyone or have done anything noteworthy in his life,” Wezel replied.

“Or, as you’ve already suggested, he isn’t using his real name online. It’s also possible David Ridder isn’t his real name,” Ajay suggested as he finished his notes and tucked them into his shirt pocket.

Wezel looked skeptical. “Why would your client give you a false name?”

“It’s possible he isn’t aware of it,” Ajay replied as he stood up and took his laptop back from Wezel.

“Our missing person is using an alias?” Wezel popped his porn back on the screens. “That’s going to make him hard to find.”

“It is going to make this case more difficult,” Ajay agreed as he headed for the door. “If he is using an assumed name, there may be definite reasons other than the one I was given why he would suddenly want to leave the area.”

“Bet you didn’t ask for enough money.”

“Sometimes, it’s about more than money,” Ajay replied defensively.

“Sometimes, it’s about the challenge and the—”

“Nope, didn’t ask for enough money,” Wezel accused in disgust. “So much for getting paid...”

That stung, but Ajay couldn’t reassure him. The case was turning out to be more complicated than he had been led to believe.

As Ajay made his way back to his apartment—stepping over Mrs. Murphy’s black and white cat, Suzie, in the hallway—he reminded himself Wezel wasn’t hurting for money. The man lived with his grandfather; and his grandfather, though he refused to live in style, was rather well off financially. While it still wasn’t right to stiff his information source, he didn’t need to let guilt keep him from doing his job.

Conscience settled and back in his apartment, Ajay sat at his kitchen table and spread his notes out to study them. Sipping at his coffee while he read, he considered what he now knew. Nothing concrete, of course. His suspicions were just that until he had them validated by his client or by the facts he uncovered during his investigation. The trick was to not let those suspicions color his thinking. He had to stay open and fluid, ready to accept new suspicions and the new theories he uncovered.

Ajay's cell phone rang, and he absently pulled it out of his pocket and read the number. "Hi, Mom."

"Safe and sound?" she asked worriedly.

"Yes," Ajay replied as he lined up his notes on the table and continued to stare at them. "Not a scratch."

"Ask him why the hell he was chasing Pokestas!" his father's voice shouted from a distance.

"Your father says you were running through traffic," his mother told him. "You've got to be more careful, Jay."

"I was being careful," Ajay replied irritably. She could always manage to make him feel five years old again.

"Why haven't you asked him why yet?" his father wanted to know.

"Because he's a moron?" Ajay heard his brother, Steven, suggest helpfully.

"Tell him, he's the moron," Ajay retorted.

"Ajay!" his mother admonished in a long suffering tone.

"I didn't start it," Ajay complained.

"Why am I not getting an answer to my question, woman?" Ajay's father exploded.

"It wasn't anything dangerous," Ajay told his mother to forestall her heated reply. "You know Poky, always doing small time stealing and fencing. It was dog-napping this time. I managed to get back Mrs. Anthony's poodle."

His mother sighed and said, "I don't know where that man went wrong. He wasn't a bad person when we were children."

"People make their own choices, good or bad, Ma," Ajay replied sympathetically.

"Poor Mrs. Anthony though," his mother went on, growing angry now. "How could he? That dog is like her child. She must have been terrified for him."

"She gave me cookies and milk. We talked. She seemed all right," Ajay reassured her.

Ajay began making notes of the questions he intended to ask Temple as his mother, unable to ignore his father any longer, had to relay Ajay's words to him. Ajay wasn't surprised when his father took the phone and said, somehow understanding full well what Ajay hadn't said, "Son, pay is money. It is not cookies and milk, even from Patsy Anthony. How are you going to eat and pay the rent?"

"She's on a fixed income, Da," Ajay reminded him. "You wouldn't take a cab fare from her, would you?"

A pause followed by a sigh. "No," his father admitted. Then gruffly, knowing his next words would embarrass them both, he added, "You know you're welcome to come home if things get too tight for you?"

"You tell him he can come home whenever he needs to! Our son is not going to starve or live on the streets!" his mother shouted.

"I just did tell him that, you daft woman!" his father shouted back.

"What a loser!" his younger brother snickered.

"Steven!" his mother admonished. "That's no way to talk about your brother!"

"Big talk from Mr. No Job," his father grumbled under his breath. Then he said louder, "Don't mind him, Jay. I know you're doing good work. The pay will come with the experience. That's how it is."

Ajay was feeling the flush of humiliation though, his brother's words hitting home. Loser. He didn't want that insult to have any truth to it. "I'm about to get some more experience, Da," he told his father. "I have a missing

person case. It's not dangerous," he quickly assured the man, "but it may take me out of town for a few days."

"Officer Murphy, down at the pub, says a man always has a partner... or a backup," his father said with worry plain in his voice. "Since you don't have either, you have to let us know where you'll be, alright. We'll be your backup."

Ajay smiled even as he winced at the thought of his mother and father helping him with his case. "Will do, Da."

"So," his father fished, exchanging worry for excitement now. "Who's the client? Is she a beautiful, mysterious person? A blonde in high heels?"

"You watch too many detective movies," Ajay chuckled.

"Since all of the movies are yours, son, that's like calling the kettle black," his father replied with a snicker. "So?"

"Blonde," Ajay replied and then couldn't help adding, "and beautiful; very beautiful."

"Ah," his father replied in a tone that said he was reading between the lines. "You like this client. Married?"

"I wouldn't think so," Ajay replied but then felt uncomfortable at the thought of trying to explain to his parents why he was so certain of that.

"He likes his client?!" his mother's voice exclaimed, and then she was suddenly on the phone; his father in the back ground complaining. "Is she a nice person?"

Ajay considered the question and then replied honestly, "Seems to be."

"Nice and beautiful?" Ajay's mother warmed to the subject, and Ajay could almost feel her smile of pleasure. "And you like this client?" she persisted.

Ajay felt himself blush. He held his pencil very tightly, almost breaking the lead.

"Jay?" his mother prompted.

"I..." Ajay floundered, at a loss for words and not certain why he was suddenly feeling embarrassed. He was developing a knot of anxiety in his gut.

"Bring her to dinner so we can meet her," his mother was saying.

“He’s a client and a man, Ma, not a date,” Ajay told her quickly. “Sorry to disappoint you. He’s an artists’ model. They paint him. One of his clients has gone missing, and it’s keeping some of his paintings from being in an important art show. He’s hired me to find the artist.”

He sounded as if he were babbling, he realized, and put a stop to it. There was an uncomfortable silence, but at least he had put the brakes on his mother’s endless need to see him in a relationship.

His mother finally said in a very low, strangely emotional voice, “No matter what, Ajay Kavanagh, we will love you. You know that, don’t you? It’s all right with your father and me if you bring him to dinner.”

“Ma!” he protested, suddenly understanding fully what she was implying. “It’s not like that! I mean, if you think something is going on...that we’re...that I’m interested in... He’s just a client!” he finally blurted loudly, completely embarrassed now.

“Dinner is always at six,” his mother insisted.

“What are you on about, you daft woman?” his father wanted to know. “Stop your nattering nonsense and give me back the phone.”

“Da, I do have work to do,” Ajay protested weakly.

“I know, I know,” his father replied. “Don’t let your Ma get you twisted into a knot. You know how women are, always hoping for a big wedding.”

“I know,” Ajay sighed as he realized he had made a crude doodle of Temple’s face. “It’s okay, Da.”

“Make sure you eat food for dinner and not just drink damned coffee,” his father admonished him. “Let us know when you leave town.”

“I will,” Ajay replied, mind in too much turmoil to say anything else.

His father hung up and Ajay let the phone drop to the table with a clatter along with the pencil. He rubbed his face hard, dark blue eyes troubled. He had been accused of being gay twice that day; once by his mother—if he had understood her correctly. Why they would think something like that escaped him. Nothing in his life would lead anyone to that conclusion, and he wasn’t

about to chalk it up to elusive woman's intuition.

"He's just a client," Ajay affirmed as he picked up his pencil again and drew a firm line through the bad drawing of Temple. He added, even though he was certain there wasn't any possibility of it, "And that's the way it's going to stay."