

Wild Ones
by
Della Boynton

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Included is an excerpt from book two and from my novel Dream Time.

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

The townsfolk and the farmers hated how they wandered the streets in their mix of Middle Eastern, gypsy, and second hand store clothing, smoked pot, stole from the farmer's fields and the local stores, and always smelled strongly of patchouli and clove cigarettes. Their get together, 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 woman 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 leggy bottle blondes walk the warm sands. Her big blue eyes, lightly tanned skin, and heart shaped features, though, convinced Peter that her hair color wasn't the product of a good colorist. She wore a sundress with spaghetti straps the color of her eyes and sandals that were totally impractical for the rocky countryside or the treacherous ground among the pine forests in the park.

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

Petula had been his father's dedicated assistant longer than 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 woman at the back of the church. He tried to convince himself he was practicing priestly concern, but he knew he was lying to himself.

Her seat was empty.

Peter's eyes swept the church 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 woman to hide. He was certain he would have heard the doors grate against the jam if she had exited, yet clearly she 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 woman walking up a hill covered in wild flowers and tall grass and crowned by a thick stand of lodge pole pine trees. Her sun dress caught a small breeze and rippled along with her white-blond hair. She seemed an image out of a fine painting; nature, beauty, and rarified sunlight. Mesmerized, Peter's eyes followed her until she 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-Boho chick to 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 Evie?”

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 woman standing before him.

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

And that would be their only similarity, Peter thought. She had a very unique appearance. She couldn’t have weighed more than 100 pounds. She 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. She wore large, round, steampunk style, sunglasses with gold rims that had small cogs on the sides and filigree designs around the lenses. Those lenses were opaque and mirrored Peter’s wary expression. Her tiny body, clothed in psychedelic colored tights, overlarge hiking boots, and a

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

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

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

“You’re a priest?”

“Reverend Strike.”

Her smile dropped as her index finger pushed her sunglasses back into place. She managed to look incredulous even behind her mask of mirrored lenses. “Evie doesn’t like churches. Why would she go into yours?”

“Maybe to get out of the heat?”

She mulled that over as she looked past him. He thought about what she was seeing. A hoe, a shovel, turned over, rocky earth. Normal people would have concluded that he had been gardening. She wasn’t normal. Peter knew the exact moment when she began to suspect that he had buried the body of Evie in the defunct flower beds.

“I’m going to plant petunias.”

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

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

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

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

“I like purple.”

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

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

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

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

Acrobats? A lewd image formed in Peter's mind that included her, a trapeze, and very limber men. He dismissed it quickly, but she clenched her jaw and he wondered if she had guessed his thoughts.

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

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

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

Calypso tilted her head down and looked at him over the rim of her glasses again. Her intense stare challenged him, maybe even threatened. Her eyes told him he would be sorry if he tried to stop her from leaving. Her 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.” She made the word short and sharp and then she walked past

him, heading for the nearby highway. Peter thought it must be Calypso'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 her. For reasons he couldn't fathom, he ignored her unspoken warning and did just that, as if she was a magnet drawing him after her.

They passed Peter's turned over flower beds, the ornamental white rocks he had dug out of them piled to one side in a loose pyramid like a pagan altar. 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 her brief escort, Calypso walked quickly. Her boots made crunching sounds on the gravel and her red dreads, pendants, scarves, and feathers bounced on her back with each step she took. Peter's tennis shoes were quieter, but not soundless. She had to be aware that he was following her.

Peter wasn't prone to casual hookups. The moment had to be right, the moon a certain shade of blue, her personality just so, and there had to be no chance she could find him again, or want to identify him to law enforcement. He wasn't one of those predators, or abusive sons of bitches who he thought should be put behind bars for life, but he hadn't been an upstanding citizen either. There were warrants for his arrest for good reason. His crimes didn't rise to the level where redemption was out of the question, though, and 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 woman 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. Calypso already suspected he had done something to Evie. His actions were only confirming her fears.

“It’s a long way to town,” he said loudly, wanting her to know his motives were pure, even though he was confused as to what they actually were.

“Hitchhiking is dangerous. Most of the traffic isn’t local.”

“Are you suggesting an alternative?”

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

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

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

“Is that a pick-up line?”

“More like an offer from a concerned citizen.”

She eyed him over her shoulder and then began looking for a likely ride. Several cars sped by. A red truck, covered in dried mud, didn’t meet her 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. She surprised him by laughing and turning to look at him fully. Her smile had dimples.

“You don’t date much do you?”

“No,” he admitted.

“Keep practicing.”

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

“On someone else.”

“I’m sorry.”

She shrugged and looked at the road again. “I get a lot of that. People are

drawn to the unusual. The problem, though, is that they get tired of it quickly too. Find a nice church lady... Do you have a first name?"

"Peter."

She frowned. Still looking at traffic, she said, "You don't look like a Peter. More like a.... Hunter."

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

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

Her words made it sound as if she was interested in Peter, but that she was sacrificing any good time to be had for his sake. Like him, she wasn't opposed to sexual encounters with no complications. That might have turned some men off, but Peter felt strangely disgusted with himself, not her. He felt more critical of his friends with benefits arrangement with Cherie, as if that made him not good enough for Calypso. It was a definite double standard he imposed on himself and he wasn't sure why. Perhaps he wanted to be who Calypso

imagined him to be, an honest, upstanding man of the cloth. Even though she hadn't known the late Peter Strike, he still felt measured by his standard and left wanting. The real Peter had been a hero after all and he was only the man the real Peter had died saving.

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

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

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

"Three miles," she promised. "That's not far enough to be called hitchhiking."

The man chuckled deep in his chest and spat again. It almost hit the butterfly. The insect fluttered away to a safer place among the high grass and dandelions. "Sounds right." The trucker looked at Peter and squinted, as if 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.

Calypso made a dismissive gesture with her hand. "He's staying."

"All right, then. Hop on board."

Calypso looked back at Peter and her smile changed. It was serious and friendly, not fake like the one she had given the driver. She asked, "If you see Evie, please tell her to go back to the Dao or call me."

"I will." Peter assured her. He wasn't happy about letting her 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." Calypso didn't let Peter see her eyes. The mirrored lenses of her sunglasses were a wall, repelling him and preventing him from arguing further. She nodded to indicate something behind him and said, "Stick with your church and your dog and forget about crazy people like me. Normal is underrated."

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

Peter picked up the empty beer can and crushed it further, surprised at his flare of temper. The sudden greasy feeling under his fingers instantly repulsed him. He felt like flinging the can away from him. 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 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 Evie from leaving and somehow disappearing. Calypso had rejected him soundly, preferring a ride with a trucker, who probably *was* a serial killer, rather than

stay with him. A stray dog would rather starve than take food from his hand. Now the dog seemed to be taunting him. 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. Calypso had been afraid of doing him damage by sticking around. The truth was that he was far more capable of doing her life harm.

Peter pretended to be a 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. Cherie was the only exception, but he could hardly count

her. Their shallow friendship consisted of small talk before sex. Neither of them asked questions beyond, *Was that good for you?*

He found another empty whiskey bottle. Peter pulled the dirt caked thing out of the earth and added it to the pile of eleven others. Someone had been using the flower beds to hide a drinking problem. He wondered if it had been the late Mrs. Rebecca Williams. All the bottles seemed old. Reverend Williams had talked about her lovingly, as if she had been as perfect and sinless as an angel straight from Heaven. 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 his secret to keep. After he finished cleaning out the flower beds, Peter put the bottles in a plastic bag and put them in the garbage.

The area around the church looked barren now: piled rocks and bare, turned over dirt the only things left for a 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 her 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. Calypso might get a few harsh words or dirty looks, but it wasn't a backwoods town in the Appalachians. Peter doubted she would come to any physical harm.

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

Peter wiped sweat off his forehead with the back of his hand and felt sweat also soaking his shirt. 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. Calypso can take care of herself. I’ll get an early start tomorrow, purchase everything I need for the flower beds, and have it all finished before it gets too hot. I deserve to sit in my lounge chair, watch TV, and have a beer. You are not going to convince me otherwise.”

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 girls who were bad news and were going to be gone in a week. Calypso had made the right decision.

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

The trucker actually blushed and gave her a flustered smile in return. “Welcome, ma’am. Take care.”

“You too, Clyde,” she replied and gave him a jaunty wave and slammed the big door shut.

Calypso 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 she hadn’t just hitched a ride in it. The driver was already leaving her 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 she had deftly deflected without bruising his pride too much, he had talked about the weather and how walking in the summer heat could kill a grown man, let alone someone as frail looking as Calypso. She had allowed him to take on the mantle of her rescuer and she

was certain, if she ever saw him again, he would give her another ride. Never burn assets, she told herself.

Calypso hated the faux trading town facades of the shops on Windham's main street. Only a month ago she had been living with a Yaghnobi potter in a primitive and mountainous part of Tajikistan. She 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 Dao sluts," a man muttered to a companion as she passed them by. He wanted her to hear him. He wanted a confrontation.

Calypso didn't acknowledge the slur. She walked like she owned the town, head up and eyes on the horizon as if they were beneath her notice. Her steps were steady as she took purposeful strides and acted as if she knew her destination. Some men were emboldened by pride, but there were those who found their cajones when a woman was meek as well. The point being, if they were going to confront her and make trouble, it wouldn't matter how she 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 her chin and told her 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 her. Calypso's attitude wasn't her only defense.

She 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. Calypso hated going inside, but felt it necessary if she hoped to complete a full investigation into the disappearance of her 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 Calypso immediately. She 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," Calypso told them as they surrounded her, all of them wearing disapproving frowns.

Calypso slowly pulled her cell phone out of the small handmade, multicolored pouch tied around her 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 her phone operated like a wind up watch. The Yaghnobi potter had laughed

in delight at the contrast of ancient and industrial, her appreciation and understanding not limited by her lack of a formal education. These employees, some of them probably holding worthless college degrees, didn't see the humor at all as she put in her password and opened up the picture of Evie.

"I'm looking for my friend. She goes by Evie." Calypso felt frustrated when only two actually looked at the photo. She 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 she was sure they had all looked at the photo, she lowered her phone.

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

"No." The tall, dark haired man who replied made a show of looking down his nose at her 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?" Calypso wondered.

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

"You do need to go, ma'am," 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 Calypso and seemed twice her age scowled and looked ready to grab her. They inched forward to intimidate her, but waited for their manager to okay forcing Calypso's exit.

"I don't want any trouble, I'm just looking for some answers," Calypso insisted, but in the end she left the shop without any information rather than cause trouble.

Calypso now had an indicator of the level of dislike for the Dao members. Though Evie looked like the personification of a beautiful California girl, the Dao didn't have the resources to maintain her 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, Evie would have known she would be confronted and forced out of the more main stream establishments. She had probably avoided them in favor of ones who didn't mind a girl with a few twigs in her hair, muddy shoes, and limited resources.

Calypso still had few facts. Evie had gone missing Saturday after expressing her view that the Dao wasn't as exciting as she had been lead to believe. Finding someone willing to leave in the midst of the Dao had probably been impossible. Evie 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. She had not returned to the Dao, though, and it was clear by signs only Dao members knew that she hadn't taken the trail that led back to the campsite. That meant she had either returned to the highway to hitch a ride or something bad had happened to her. The lack of a call or a text from her made Calypso lean towards the latter explanation, as much as she didn't want to.

Calypso wished Evie had taken her 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, Calypso was inclined to believe them.

Calypso hadn't dismissed Strike from her list of suspects, even though he appeared harmless. Something about him made her suspicious, but her instincts didn't identify him as a killer. It's possible he knew more than he was saying. If her investigation of the town came up empty, she needed to visit him 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 her, whether in irritation or because he was farsighted she couldn't tell.

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

Calypso studied him from behind her glasses as she took a small paper cup and sipped. The cold coffee tasted like hazelnut and local herbs.

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

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

"Tchinouk."

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

She knew a few phrases. He stared at her blankly when she used them now.

"Not a native speaker?" she 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?"

Calypso started to take another sample of the coffee. The boy waved her

hand away.

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

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

The boy looked cautiously and then nodded. “I’ve seen her. Sheriff Rio harassed her and made her cry. She was pretty and funny so I gave her an extra coffee. When she left she headed towards the Hippy Emporium.”

Calypso let the insult pass. “Hippy Emporium?”

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

“Thanks.”

“You’re not going to buy coffee?”

“I’m a poor Dao girl, remember?” she arched an eyebrow at him and laughed at his disgusted expression as she turned on her heel and followed his 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 Evie. Illuminated by his light, she seemed pale, her skin and eyes as colorless as a dead fish. Her sundress was soaking wet and clung to her body. Her hair was also wet, the blonde darkened and hanging flat against the sides of her face like strands of seaweed.

She asked, 'Where's Julie?' in a thin reedy voice, as if she couldn't draw air into her lungs. 'She promised to take care of me,' she complained.

'Who's Julie?' he asked her.

Evie's pale face frowned and she 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 Evie a question, he felt an acute revulsion towards her. He was glad

she 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 Evie had been brought into being because he worried about Calypso'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 girls is missing," Padilla continued. "Nothing new, of course, but I was told the missing woman attended your church service Sunday. Is that true?"

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

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

"Did she 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 her."

"And you didn't encounter her 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 girl might have come to her senses and left the Dao for good, or just wandered off to the next town without telling anyone. Who can blame her? 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 Evie. 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 woman 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 Evie'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 girl.

Peter was truly starting to think of her as dead. Maybe he should believe in prayer and offer a few, asking for her safety as he had promised Padilla? Life had taught him 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 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, Calypso had slipped in unnoticed. Afraid to risk a light, she had availed herself of the shower in the gloom of a sinking sun and had used touch alone to find a blanket in a closet. She had spent the night wrapped up in that blanket on a mattress devoid of sheets.

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

No one saw Calypso 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 her 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. Calypso touched the white owl feather bound in her dread locks. Calypso wasn't superstitious for the most part, but in her childhood, she 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. She might not believe it was the ghost of her ancestors, or an evil spirit, but she couldn't help acknowledging the low probability of seeing a white owl without attaching

some significance to it. She changed the direction she 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 her from easy sight.

The road was uneven under her 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. She was still walking in false light, though, and the fog, and they probably saved her from detection when she heard voices up ahead.

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

Calypso had passed that way in the dark the evening before and hadn't seen the pond. She 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, she took the risk and hurried into that darkness.

Something hit her at knee level. Going too fast to stop, Calypso pitched forward and tumbled into something with unforgiving hard edges that slammed into tender parts of her body. She smelled pine needles, rotten leaves, and old wood as she forced herself to lay face down and not cry out. Her head swam and her pulse was racing wildly as she convulsed with the need to cough and gasp for air. She took deep, steady breaths instead and long moments passed before she became aware that the people on the road were very close.

"I heard something," a man said in a tone that sounded as if he had said it already and was doubling down on his observation.

"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 her. She’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 woman might have?”

“You think she’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 Calypso. She 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.

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

When the voices of the men finally began to fade because of distance and the rising sound of a cricket chorus, Calypso finally dared to ease her 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.

Calypso froze, unconsciously holding her breath.

“That woman they sent this time,” he continued, “she 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.

Calypso finally dared to sit up. The sunrise was chasing away the shadows and the fog was no longer impenetrable. She tried not to groan as she felt scrapes and bruises on the front half of her body. There was enough light now to see that she 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 Calypso start violently as it jumped past her face and landed on one of the wooden seats. It had a cricket in its mouth, gumming it slowly as it blinked at her.

Shuddering, Calypso exited the canoe as quietly as she could manage. As she straightened her clothes and took stock of her injuries, she thought about what she had heard. She allowed herself to assume that someone had seen her 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 her.

Calypso 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 her unawares. When they discovered that she wasn’t there, they might assume she was in the surrounding woods and search there first. They wouldn’t think they had passed her on the road.

A patrol car was parked on the side of the road. Calypso looked inside as she 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, Calypso was even more determined to put distance between her and the cabins. Something about their voices told her they wouldn't make a distinction between her being found in the cabin and simply being suspected of having slept the night there. It would be harder for them to arrest her for it if she was in town and among people who might question their interpretation of the law. At least she 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 Calypso had asked her about Evie the day before. She had told Calypso that Evie had eaten some of her plants, had asked for a job, and had begged customers for money before she had asked Evie to leave. Her tone had implied that Calypso should leave as well. Calypso hadn't argued. She had felt the woman's eyes boring into her as she had walked out of the garden center chain link gates and taken the road that lead to the cabins.

Calypso's mind had an '*aha!*' moment. She thought she now knew who had tipped off authorities that a Dao girl was loitering in the vicinity of the cabins.

Calypso 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, Calypso thought. Calypso's stomach growled and she thought about how long it had been since she had eaten a meal. As she reached the town, she decided to stay hidden though. She 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 a Dao girl without proof she had committed a crime. She 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 her that the employees of the coffee shop had just arrived. She heard them moving about inside the shop and the smell of coffee began filling the air. Her stomach growled again. To distract herself, she went over recent events and committed every detail she could recall to memory and to a file on her phone.

“Calypso?”

She started and looked up from her phone. She recognized the man walking towards her.

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 Calypso 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 her, he had claimed to be an important person in the Dao hierarchy and she 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.

Calypso 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. Calypso had cultivated Graymonger's attraction to her in hopes of getting invited into the inner sanctum, but he seemed nervous, almost afraid, whenever she suggested it.

Graymonger put his foot on the first step of the stoop and leaned towards her. He smelled like cinnamon and rum, which made Calypso remember the Old Spice aftershave her father used. The small golden beads he 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 Calypso wondered if he was wearing a colored contact. That eye looked her over critically, noting her scrapes, small bruises, and slightly disheveled appearance.

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

"I fell in the woods."

He 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."

He 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."

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

"I'll remember that."

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

She smiled at him and nodded, but then she looked down at her hands and pretended to be coy. She wasn't opposed to having sex with Graymonger, but

being hard to get might make him more likely to try to impress her to change her mind. She wanted into the inner sanctum of the Dao and he was her 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. Calypso almost stood up, ready to leave, but Graymonger lightly put a hand on her arm to keep her 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.

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

The coffee shop girl grunted sourly again and went back inside the shop. She let the screen door slam shut and Calypso 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," Calypso said as she took the plastic lid off of her coffee cup and smelled the spicy aroma appreciatively. It smelled like cinnamon and some other aromatic herbs she 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 her with his cup. "Don't worry, darling, I'll do the work for us both."

"Always the gentlemen," Calypso said and chuckled.

He winked as he sipped his coffee and then said after he swallowed, "Not always, but some ladies like it that way."

He was dangling an offer again. She could play him only so long. She hadn't reached the limit yet, but she was flirting with the line drawn in the sand when she 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 woman on the back of my motorcycle? Not in the least. Why the tour though?"

She reached into the bag and found another pastry. The tan frosting on hers smelled like maple syrup. "I promised I would watch after Evie, but she left the Dao and didn't come back. I want to make sure she didn't get into trouble."

She took a bite of her 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 her mouth. She allowed it as she made appreciative sounds and swallowed her 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," she replied.

He looked comically sad. "I can't claim to be a prince."

"Good. I'm not a princess."

His smile became sexy. He really was a handsome man, Calypso thought. He assured her, "I will treat you as if you were."

She hoped that he would. She wasn't interested in a casual hookup and she

didn't like using physical sex to manipulate people. A Mexican Catemaco Brujo once told her that sex was a powerful magic connected to her soul. When she used sex for ill purposes a little bit of her soul turned to stone. It was for love and healing only. While she could dismiss the shaman's long religious conversation that had mixed Catholicism with an ancient religion, she couldn't deny the heavy depression she felt after such acts.

She finished her pastry and licked her 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 her. 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."

His sky blue eye opened again and regarded her 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 her on the stoop.

Calypso asked curiously, "Why not just pay for it? You obviously have money."

His hand holding the empty cup pressed against his heart and he 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."

She 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 her to leave immediately. "I'll return as soon as I may, fair Princess Calypso." He gave her a small bow.

“Thank you, gallant Graymonger.”

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

It took Graymonger nearly a half hour to finish his work. He passed by her 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.”

She obeyed cautiously. Graymonger dropped something onto her 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.

She blinked stupidly at it as she tried to make sense of a man who took out garbage and cleaned floors to pay for coffee and donuts, but then bought her a gift.

“Two Birds said you were a bear,” Graymonger informed her 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?”

Calypso put it on and centered it on her chest with her numerous other necklaces. “Thank you. You do realize that breakfast and jewelry won't buy sex?”

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

Graymonger gave her 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, he 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 misusing her own 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 her 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. He 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 his 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. He 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. "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 Dao girl is missing,” Peter explained. “She came to my Sunday service before she disappeared. Sheriff Padilla wanted to know if she 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. “She didn’t find comfort in your service so she went and offed herself.”

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 Evie walking across a field of tall grass and wild flowers came to his mind’s eye. He tried to see a despondent woman in that image and came up short. One of her hands had been out and touching the flowers as she passed them. She had tossed back her long hair and raised her head to admire the mountains in the distance. He wished he had seen her face. Perhaps he was a fake priest, but that didn’t mean he wasn’t human enough to wonder if he could have helped her somehow.

“I don’t think so,” his said and sipped at his coffee. The rich, fruity taste only hinted at the herbs. “She 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 her 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 she fell into a cave or a ravine.”

“Or the Rev killed and buried her,” 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 she 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 his 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 Calypso.

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 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.

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 a Dao girl, even though, deep down, he began to suspect he *was* obsessed with Calypso. He couldn't deny that his trip into town had included the hope that he might see her 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 him 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. He 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 girl 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 Calypso. 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 the Dao girl and buried her 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 Calypso as the subject of Stanwyck's surveillance, especially since the officer had made her appearance after Calypso's departure. Considering the participants of the Dao were known for stealing, Stanwyck's interest in Calypso and her companion was understandable. Peter felt relieved he could placate his paranoia, yet he felt concerned for Calypso 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 Calypso.

“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 skinny girl had red dreads and dressed steam punk. You know what that is, right? She 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 girl 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 she asked that question, Peter's heart skipped a beat and his paranoia kicked into high gear again. Did Stanwyck know that Calypso had visited him? Had the truck driver told someone in town that he had picked Calypso up from the driveway of a church and that an anxious priest had been there to see her 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 woman matching your description came to my church in search of that missing Dao girl,” he replied. “She called herself Calypso. She told me she was going into town to look for the missing girl, though she suspected the girl might have hooked up with someone and taken off completely.”

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

“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 him 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 his 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 girl in town just now. She 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, “She’s a career street bitch, always looking over her shoulder for the law. She’ll make a mistake, though, and I’ll bag her.”

The Dao girl walked the streets as if she owned them, as free as the wind and so sure of her invincibility. Stanwyck had wanted to show her just how weak and vulnerable she was and how much she had been lying to herself. Stanwyck had wanted to see that moment in her young eyes when she lost her 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 girl and concentrate on filling her quota. Once that was completed, she could find the Dao girl 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 her,” 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 Evie. His fear wasn't being reasonable, he told himself, but fear often wasn't. He couldn't calm himself down by telling himself that being seen horn dogging over Boho women 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 Evie hadn't been declared dead yet. His more cynical self, that had seen ugly things in the city, didn't indulge in Pollyannaism. For him, she was dead until she proved that she 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. Evie'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 Evie after her departure from his church. Being seen answering Calypso's questions wasn't evidence of wrongdoing either. Understandably, she was a person distraught over her friend's disappearance. She 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 Calypso had been seen riding a red Ducati on Windham's streets. Peter hadn't buried her in a flower bed with Evie.

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 women, 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 women, and blonde men riding red Ducati in attendance.

As for Evie'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 his kitchen knife and in her Sunday best. That sudden flight of fancy didn't seem as fanciful as he 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 his biker chick 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, they certainly didn't fight 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 Calypso 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 she stood there with an expectant expression, he chewed and swallowed, almost choking. A part of him did cartwheels of joy while the rest felt incensed at her intrusion.

Calypso's steampunk sunglasses were on top of her red dreadlocks and multiple head scarves. Her bright green eyes were arresting. Peter had never seen that particular shade before. Her hair was still full of beads and feathers. She wore several tank tops of various tie dye colors and leotards that were so tight they looked like a second skin. She still wore her big hiking boots and all her jewelry. A new addition hung around her 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 her angrily.

She 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," he 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 woman 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," she said as she 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 her coffee.

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

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

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

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

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

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

She frowned as she picked up a small sugar shaker and sprinkled sugar on top of her 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,” he 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 Evie’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 her leaving so he could put in his report that she had left his jurisdiction.

"Maybe someone else from the Dao reported her missing?" he suggested.

"It's possible." She put the sugar down and then looked at the table closely. She picked up her 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.

Calypso ate her toast with appreciative sounds, taking sips of her coffee between bites. Peter drank his juice and waited impatiently for her to finish and tell him why she had come to see him. The news still played on his laptop, the sound low enough not to be a distraction. Still, Peter turned it on mute and pushed it away from him. He tried not to stare at his guest. He let his attention wander between a news reporter, who was now doing an unintentional mime act, and Calypso. Because of that she surprised him when she suddenly stood up, her chair scraping the floor loudly again.

Calypso wiped at her lips with a napkin and then let the napkin drop onto her plate. She slid her steampunk sunglasses over her eyes, an intentional barrier between them, and backed towards the door. Her lips were smiling tightly and her expression dared him to criticize her now obvious freeloading.

"You take a lot of chances," he said sourly. He didn't get up from his seat. He didn't want to seem threatening.

"I decided you were a nice guy last time we met," she replied as she backed to the door and reached behind her to put her 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 relaxed in his chair, accepting that he had been duped. Calypso wasn’t there to see him or to impart some important message. Breakfast had been her only aim.

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

She nodded as she opened the door, still facing him. Though she had just proclaimed him a nice guy, she still acted cautious. It told him a lot about Calypso. She wasn’t a fool. She 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 her. Peter began to entertain the idea she might be armed and dangerous.

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

Calypso blinked in surprise at his knowledge.

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

She 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?”

She chuckled. “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 Calypso.

Her head cocked sideways a little as she regarded him. “I wasn’t in the mood yesterday. Another day I might be.”

“He’s your boyfriend, then?”

“No.”

“Oh.”

Peter knew she could see his relief in his expression. She could also see

that he wasn't properly outraged by her promiscuous habits. His act was slipping, he thought fearfully. His fascination with Calypso had to end. Defensively, he said, "The wages of sin is death."

Her lips pressed together into a thin line and then she replied, "I didn't take you for being the preachy kind, Reverend. Don't bother trying to save my soul. It's running with the Wild Ones."

That seemed like a snippet of a poem, or maybe a lyric from a song.

"The church is always ready to welcome you, Calypso. Remember that. Redemption is always possible."

"If you say so." She sounded sarcastic and her 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. He felt disappointed that Calypso was casual about sex, but he couldn't condemn her to eternal hellfire for it. In fact, he wished he could take his words back.

"Goodbye and thanks for breakfast," she said it in a perfunctory manner. It was reflexive curtesy.

"Anytime."

He meant it and he could tell he confused her with his mixed signals. She 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 Evie she was walking towards it. She 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."

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

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

Prayer flags.

His dream about Evie 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. Calypso 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 hurried outside. 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 and frustration along with it. He didn't have any more time to spend on Boho women, 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 she 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 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 Calypso had been wearing. He didn't want to think too hard about his ability to remember her 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 Evie, but her memory was overlaid by his image of her 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 Calypso had removed hers and returned to the Dao, or if she was still looking for Evie in the forest. Perhaps she had hooked up with her 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 Evie. 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 Calypso? 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 Calypso 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 Evie'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 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

Evie. They weren't searching carefully for signs of her, 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 him. 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 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 Evie'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 Evie'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.

Calypso licked her fingers as she walked up the hill. She relished the taste of cinnamon sugar. It made her think of breakfast at her 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 she still visited on occasion and the only property she had kept after her parent's death. In all else, she was a footloose gypsy and liked it that way. Perhaps one day she would settle down and sink some roots into the New England soil, but she was young still and liked the freedom of a rolled tent and an oversized ruck sack as her only belongings.

Calypso approached the Dao flag. She almost passed it, but then remembered her strip of turquoise leather and removed it. She touched Evie's, a strip from an old brown scarf decorated with sunflowers. Calypso remembered her taking it from the bottom of her backpack and pointing out a dirt stain as the reason she 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. Evie's strip was more memorable than Calypso's strip of turquoise leather and to be fair, Calypso doubted few except Graymonger would remember her as much as they remembered Evie and her golden California style beauty. Calypso patted Evie's scarf and silently promised to find her before leaving the flag behind and continuing up the hill.

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

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

evaporated. She 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. Calypso had lied to Strike. Graymonger had been a perfect gentleman.

They had parted ways in front of the church. Graymonger had given Calypso a courtly bow and promised to escort her 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 Calypso had used that reason to separate herself from Graymonger. She hadn't wanted him with her when she paid her 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 Calypso 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 her had felt entirely genuine. She had personal experience enough to know that killers didn't usually fulfill a woman's request for toast with cinnamon sugar, and get embarrassed over ants, when he was secretly thinking of burying her in the flower beds after perpetrating some horrible assault on her person.

After talking to Strike, she was more certain than ever that Padilla was still her number one suspect even though she had few facts to support her belief. What she did know could fill a post-it note. For some reason, Evie had felt it necessary to slip out of the Dao and go into town. Calypso felt that, though

they hadn't known each other long, Evie would have at least texted a brief goodbye and an explanation if she had decided to leave permanently. Since Calypso had failed to find her in town, and she 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 she could concentrate and walk what would amount to a crime scene grid formation.

As Calypso started down the hill towards the Dao flag at the edge of the forest, she 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 her follow its erratic movements when it ducked in and out of shadow as it hunted. Calypso watched it cautiously as she 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. Calypso felt more fearful not knowing where the fox was and altered her steps to leave the path and circumnavigate the field. She took her time, searching for clues as she walked. After pushing through the tall grass and the wild flowers to reach a clearing near the border of the forest, she was dismayed to find her leggings were full of burrs. She 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 Evie.

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

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

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

"Shit!"

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

A rush of annoyance was more than about her tangled hair. Calypso didn't like when people questioned her competence. Sitting around a dung fire in the middle of the Mongolian steppes, while learning intricate knot work for decorations from her host family, had taught her 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, she had learned not to mark time by a clock. The people, in what she liked to call the *two second world*, could benefit by staying a few months in that environment.

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

her free without losing a clump of her hair.

“I told you, no.”

Calypso 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. Calypso threw herself to the ground, gritting her teeth in pain as she left some of her 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 Calypso’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 Calypso's, even though he couldn't recall her wearing such a cloth. That missing cloth made him unreasonably angry and he cursed, as if, like Loco, Calypso could have found him in the forest and had purposefully not. Her delay in going down the trail to the Dao was a mystery. It wasn't until he reached the bottom of the hill that he considered she 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 Calypso walked that forest fearlessly, but the shame of not being as brave as a small, lithe woman in leotards and dread locks wasn't enough to banish his new forest phobia.

After Peter had recovered from his ordeal, 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. Calypso was temptation. If he followed that wild child into a den of iniquity, 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. He didn't like to consider a biker bar, and a willing biker chick, 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. Calypso was another matter entirely. He could easily see himself falling hard for her and following where ever she led. She was the Devil's piper, he 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. Her 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 his plans. He hoped she would stay at the Dao and not tempt him any further.

Calypso kept still long after the men stopped talking. She 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 her as if to say that she hadn't fooled them by her subterfuge.

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

Cautiously, Calypso raised her head enough to see over the tops of the grass and wildflowers. She listened intently while her eyes scanned the forest line for any movement. She felt like a hunted deer and hoped she wouldn't end up like Bambi's mother, thinking it was safe right before she took a bullet in the heart. Her bracelets clinked and clattered as she raised a hand to push some of the vegetation aside. She winced and froze. When no masculine shout of alarm sounded, she pushed at the vegetation again, giving herself 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. Calypso passed the Dao flag there and entered the forest's cool depths. She saw the blood on the ground and thought of the fox. She 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 her the men were following the path to the Dao. Putting herself in danger wasn't in her plan. She was there to gather information only, using her keen powers of observation and her ability to easily get inside the offbeat parts of any society. She wasn't there to become another victim.

Calypso took out her phone and used her GPS and maps program to research an alternative route. Hiking trails were few. Two converged and led to the Dao, the one she 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 her clothing, frogs beginning a chorus as if in celebration of the rain, and the patter of rain on the leaves of the upper canopy, she pushed through the undergrowth and began her 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 girl give his men so much trouble?

The girl was as wary and as canny as a feral cat. She had stayed one step

ahead of his men at every turn and left no opportunities to take her into custody, official or otherwise. He had personally stood in the deep shadows of the forest, seething while he watched her eat pastries, drink coffee, and make arrangements to keep Graymonger with her. Her questions about Evie and her visit with the priest had put her on his radar. She was the only person asking about Evie, the girl that had been personally selected for his quota because of her lack of attachments in the Dao and elsewhere. She needed to be taken care of permanently. If it helped him fill his quota, that 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 her. He was back up, there to make sure she didn't spot them and return to the priest for help. He 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, because he believed the church was full of hypocrites. The priest's interest in the Dao girl was therefore understandable. Strike liked wild girls. He didn't like wild girls enough to search for lost ones, though. That made him safe from Padilla, for now, even though he had inexplicably walked up the hill with a notebook and had yet to return. His low steps had looked contemplative and directionless, as if he looked for poetic inspiration, or similar such nonsense.

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

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 girl 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 Calypso 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 girl. She’s walking down the trail to the Dao. Intercept her.”

“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 she 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 girl's fear and surprise when his men caught her 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

Calypso scowled at her phone and the pulsing blip that told her where she was in relation to her surroundings. She should have reached the Dao by now, she felt, and wondered anxiously if she 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. She had startled a rabbit earlier, had accidentally flushed birds from the undergrowth, and been abused verbally by squirrels that didn't approve of her intrusion into their territory.

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

The sound of animals fighting stopped her in her tracks. She 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 Calypso sounded old, male, and annoyed. She quickly calculated his height by the sound of his voice. He was shorter than her, but that didn't mean she had the upper hand. "Reach back slowly and give me your phone."

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

“Take it and go,” Calypso told him. “You can have my purse 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 Calypso to talk to the man, make herself real to him, and gain his sympathy. He wasn’t giving her 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. She only knew he was looking for a dog, stealing her phone, and seemed pleased about the GPS app.

Staring at the small yellow flowers poking out of the forest loam Calypso 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?” Calypso 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?”

Calypso shook her head and her jewelry chimed together.

The man was suddenly at her ear. She felt a spike of adrenaline as he 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.

Calypso trembled.

He had a taser. He could use it and do as he liked to her.

Calypso 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 her nauseated.

Wood smoke reminded Calypso of her 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 her of her father's aftershave. Her mother loved rose scents. The earthy scent of Tibetan incense took Calypso 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 her first bad memory associated with a smell. She didn't think she would ever smell turkey on rye again without feeling the man's breath in her ear and the trepidation she felt waiting for the jolt of a taser.

"You're coming with me," the man told her 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?"

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

Calypso could hear fear in his voice. Something about the dog was important to him. Before he had a chance to move back again she smelled something else underneath the turkey and rye scent. Animal urine, chemical scent, and... he smelled like a lab. Calypso knew that smell intimately. He 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. Calypso thought she had enough to form a strong informed opinion about the man holding her hostage and that her investigation was finally bearing fruit.

Calypso deliberately turned on her heel, her big soled boot digging into the wet, soft loam of the forest as she pivoted to face the man. She had to abruptly look down. The man was very short, round, and wearing a lab coat covered in dirt. He was unsteadily holding a taser and her 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 her. 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 woman.

Calypso dodged him and began running, trusting her youth, agility, and stamina to outpace him and lose him in the forest. Thorny vines caught at her legs and branches whipped at her face as she stumbled on rocks and tree roots. She heard the man huffing and puffing behind her, 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.

Calypso felt a surge of relief when she heard silence behind her, but she didn't slow down. Her lungs burned and her heart beat painfully. The muscles in her legs were near their limit. She was fearful that she 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 she fell, it was so unexpected that the laboring breath in her lungs was expelled in her exclamation of shock. Her elbows, ribs, and knees hit rocks and tangled in ivy. Her face went through a large spider web, its large, splay legged inhabitant sitting suspended in mid-air. Calypso 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 her?” 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 girl had given them the slip.

“She wasn’t on the trail,” Mercer replied. “She 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 girl’s description and have his people search. I want to know that she’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 Dao girl. 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. Evie's missing scarf, or the cloth from the other Dao girl? 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 girl. 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. She had often instructed him about what caused bad luck and how to cleanse it from a person. Padilla had embraced her 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 bitch had fallen down one of the many hidden caverns in the forest. Blumenfeld squinted down into the darkness. He couldn't see her, but he could hear her groan. She was still alive. He couldn't leave her like that.

Blumenfeld had been forced to chase after her, 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 girl'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 she yet lived, she 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 girl 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 Wild Ones, Book Two coming out in April

2019

Night Haunts

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 Calypso, 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.

"She's not here!" Peter shouted back. "She left hours ago to return to the Dao."

"Liar! She isn't there and I didn't find her on the trail."

Peter was suddenly worried himself. "Her 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 her and Evie? 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, Calypso said you were asking for what she didn't

want to give. Maybe that was her way of saying you attacked her. Maybe you killed her and you're trying to put the blame on me?"

"Don't be an ass! I never laid a hand on her. She'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 gay, 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 Calypso 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 she 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 her and where was she headed?"

To be continued....

Excerpt from my Book Dream Time: available in paperback and kindle:

CHAPTER ONE

I had a dream when I was very young. In the dream, I looked down on a sweeping plain of grass that was backlit by a dying sun. That sun had just disappeared over the horizon, leaving the world in that ghostly gray light before total darkness. It was enough to allow me to pick out the thousands of people walking there.

Their faces weren't blank, but had that rather softly determined expression worn by people expecting a long journey. They were neither hostile nor friendly. Their eyes were all on the distance with a distinct lack of anticipation for their intended destination. In modern, drab colored clothing from all walks of life Native American men, women, and children, walked together in near silence.

I remember I felt strange and at a loss as to why so many people were going away.

In my latter years, I often recalled that dream and puzzled over it. Had it been a message of some sort? A warning? It's nice to think yourself that important, and I was no exception, but I couldn't think what, if anything, I was supposed to do. The dream hadn't come with instructions. I never told anyone about it and that was strange considering how often I sat and wondered about whether it had some prophetic meaning I was missing. I suppose I was embarrassed about it. If I had been supposed to spring into action and save the day, I had failed miserably.

It was some comfort to remind myself of the reality of the situation: Why would Native Americans send a dream message to someone like me? I was, after all, a genetic mutt with a list of shaky ancestors connected to the family only by conversations that usually began with, your great aunt once told me... If I was Native American then the blood was thinned by a few generations and

some sidelining on the genetic ancestry tree. Besides, I was living in the Deep South near the Gulf of Mexico, selling souvenirs to tourists and baking on the beach during my off hours. That made messianic thoughts even more ridiculous.

Don't get me wrong, I did have dreams of writing that big bestselling novel or selling my rather poor water color painting efforts to a famous gallery, but as time wore on, those dreams were becoming less likely every year. Approaching middle age was telling me to settle, become a manager of the souvenir shop, and think about retirement. I wasn't counting on a customer blowing into my shop on a hot southern morning and setting a fire under my ass.

"That isn't the Gulf Coast."

The voice came from the spinner rack containing the five for a dollar post cards. My reply was the same one it had been for my entire illustrious ten year career at Joe's Souvenirs. "I know."

I didn't look up from my own spinner rack on the register counter. It was filled with little shells attached to cheap key chains. Each shell had a name printed on it; Shandra, Sheila, Shelly, Sherry, Davis, Dermot, Devon.... They were supposed to be in alphabetical order. They weren't. Customers had taken them off and placed them back on the wrong pegs. Shandra was supposed to come before Shelly and Sheila came after Shandra. For some reason, I had made it my mission to make sure they stayed on their proper pegs. It was an eternal wasted exercise in futility, but it passed the time.

"This is Hawaii," the voice continued testily as our spinner racks turned and competed with each other by making dual squeaking noises. "There aren't any mountains here. Why would they use a photograph of mountains as a representation of this area?"

I thought the question was rhetorical. When he suddenly waved the offending post card in front of me, leaning a bit on my counter to get into my personal space, I was surprised and perturbed. It was annoying hearing the

same question all day, every day. It always gave me a fleeting feeling of being dishonest, as if I was selling a bad bootleg of real postcards that depicted the area truthfully. Rarely did customers take it up a level by waving postcards in my face and insisting I admit my dishonesty.

“Do you know how I recognize this photo?” The man was balding, his hair thin, but still retaining some blonde amongst the gray. He was wearing designer resort wear; shorts, polo shirt, and boat shoes that made him look as if he couldn’t decide whether to board a cruise ship or play a round of golf. His stern blue eyes and disgusted expression reminded me of my days in school, when a teacher was warming up to give a good lecture.

The first thing I thought of saying was not something I could allow to pass my lips if I wanted to remain gainfully employed. The tourist would certainly complain and the manager was close at hand to take that complaint. He was somewhere in the back of the store counting boxes of pecan logs and coconut patty confections; the same ones all souvenir shops carry whether they are actually in the south, near a beach, or even remotely in a tropical zone. I could imagine a souvenir shop in Alaska selling pecan logs and coconut patties next to walrus tusk scrimshaw.

“You’ve been to Hawaii?” I guessed with a fake smile plastered on my face.

“Absolutely!” the man replied. With a finger, he tapped the post card on the glass countertop and added, “I backpacked all through the Hawaiian islands. I definitely recognize this particular beach.”

He didn’t look like the type of man to rough it. He looked like a spoiled man with lots of disposable income who had time to complain about the validity of postcards. That implied that he also had time to waste making sure souvenir shop cashiers selling bogus postcards lost their jobs. I chose my next words carefully.

“That must have been some trip!”

I had chosen wisely. The man smiled warmly and leaned even more into my personal space. “Oh, it was!” he replied. “Best six months of my life. I’m a

photographer; weddings, bar mitzvahs, baby showers, small events, usually. One day, bored out of my skull, I had a mid-life crisis. I slung on a backpack with all my photography gear and took a flight to the islands with a \$100.00 bill in my pocket and a crazy dream.”

I was frowning, not seeing even a hint of the impulsive man he was describing standing before me.

The man winked and nodded. “I know you’re thinking that it was a stupid thing to do. When the plane touched down I was starting to have second thoughts myself. It wasn’t until I spotted a red ‘I’iwi right outside the airport terminal and I took my first photo, that the fear left me completely. I knew without a doubt that I needed to make that journey. I worked odd jobs and, yes, even begged on occasion, as I traveled. I took the most amazing photographs though, of animals, plants, and people I would have never seen without walking that place from end to end. Those photos made me a wealthy man. So, when I tell you that is a photo of Hawaii, I’m speaking from the experience of a man who has walked every inch of the place.”

“That’s impressive!” I replied and actually meant it, even as I wondered what a red ‘I’iwi was. Deep down, I suppose there is a gypsy in everyone longing to chuck all responsibility and security and roam the world.

The man put the postcard flat on the counter and smoothed it with one hand as if there were wrinkles. His expression was suddenly vague, as if he was reliving those good old days and maybe longing for their return. He came back to the world a moment later, with a smile and a wink, and said, “Maybe I’ll do it again before I’m too old?”

He left the postcard with me and walked out of the shop without buying anything. I blinked, sighed, and left my cash register to put the postcard back in place on the five for a dollar spinner rack.

What was the sigh for? Top of the list was the aggravation of dealing with a difficult customer. I liked my days short and without incident. If I put myself in the right mental zone I could manage not to think about the time I wasted

there that would have been better spent on activities that I cared about. Not that I had been doing much of that even on my days off. That would be next on the list of my reasons for a deep sigh. My creativity had taken a vacation to the other side of the moon and it wasn't showing any indication of a return trip. My paints were drying up. My watercolor books were stacked in a closet behind the endless clothes to be washed hamper and a few workout dumbbells that haven't seen the light of an exercise routine in years. My word processor, with its unfinished novel forever on page five, would likely remain on page five indefinitely. I had long ago lost interest in the plot... which if I remembered had been a western in the shades of John Wayne.

"Excuse me."

I turned from the spinner rack, not sure how long I had been standing there with my hand still on the postcard. The edge of the laminated paper caught one of my fingers and gave me a stinging paper cut. I sucked on the injured digit as I found the source of the interruption to my trip into my own personal world of regrets and lost opportunities.

My customer was elderly, but he was one of those men who stood straight and would probably look like he could move mountains until he died at a hundred and two. He was wearing a faded blue, long sleeve, button down shirt. The cloth was sturdy and not exactly factory perfect. His pants were dark gray and his low dark brown leather boots were well worn. All of his clothing had that hand-made look I'd only seen in old black and white photos and in movies about pioneers. His skin was lined and browned dark by the sun into something that looked very much like his old boots. His iron gray hair fell to his shoulders and was windblown. His brown eyes were observant, but not critical. He exuded a feeling of calm friendliness. The wolf at his side was far more alarming.

I wasn't an expert, but I had seen the animals in the zoo. Don't let anyone tell you they look like a dog. They look wild, dangerous, and intelligent. This one was reddish, gray and black, his fur thick and his tail held rigidly, as if he

were at attention. Amber eyes regarded me and every primal instinct inside of every one of my genes screamed, run! He's going to eat you! Logic reminded me of all those wise people, documentaries, and books assuring me wolves did not attack people.

"Pets aren't allowed in the store," I said automatically. My fear made my voice an octave higher than it should have been as I backed up and put the cash register counter between me and the big animal.

The man cocked his head a little and looked down at the wolf. "He's not exactly a pet," he replied.

"A service animal?" I guessed doubtfully.

"I'm not certain who he serves," the man replied cryptically and then stepped closer to the counter. He leaned an arm on it and lightly tapped fingers on the glass. Those fingers were short and blunt with cracked nails. They were also as weathered by age as the rest of him. I could smell him now. He had a heavy scent, the kind people who worked outside a great deal tended to accumulate. It was the smell of sun, grass, and a long day working hard.

"Can I help you?" I attempted to fall back on my training, hoping that if I treated the situation normally things might become normal.

The man's expression became embarrassed and his smile was wistful. "I've always wondered what those pecan logs taste like. I see people coming out of here and eating them. They look good."

I had a display on the counter. I took one out of the box and put it on the glass counter top. "It's cream nougat rolled in nuts," I replied and then admitted. "I've never eaten one myself."

The man eyed me and gave a little snort. "That's too bad. I can't eat them myself. I just thought you could tell me what they taste like."

The wolf made a small growling noise and brought my attention back to it immediately. I wondered about its temperament. It was still looking right at me in that too intelligent manner. It gave the appearance that it was smiling now: eyes sparkling and mouth open and stretched back to show a lolling

tongue and sharp teeth. I was a rather thin man. I was suddenly hoping that I looked too thin to eat.

I said hopefully, "He looks friendly? Where did you get him?"

The man snorted again. "I forgot I was old and went hunting alone. I fell and broke a leg. He reminds me of my arrogance." He looked up and winked at me as if sharing a joke and then said, as if it explained everything, "He's not being friendly. Wolves smile when they kill." Those words gave me a chill.

"Jack?" my boss called from his office. "Have you seen that box of snow globes with the seashore inside of them?"

I started and turned, replying, "No, haven't seen it!" When I turned back around, intending to ask the man, once again, to remove the wolf from the store, I found that he and the wolf were gone.

I blinked in confusion, looked around the empty store, and then squinted through the glass windows at the front. I could see the street, cars, and people going by, and a glaring sun, but there wasn't a trace of my strange customer and his pet.

"This is turning out to be a weird day," I muttered irritability and went to find that box of snow globes with the beach theme for my boss.

The rest of the day was uneventful. I closed the shop at four and was still in time to take the sunny walk past colorful pastel and loud primary colored shops full of the usual tourist essentials. People passed me wearing everything from business suits to string bikinis and flip flops. When I came to the intersection of sixth and Main Street, there was a definite direction that told anyone watching your financial situation. Turning right led you to the beaches and the expensive cottages and high dollar condominium high rises. Turning left lead you to a rutted road full of sand, cracked asphalt, cheap housing, and a trailer park full of dilapidated R.V.s and single wide mobile homes. The R.V.'s were permanent fixtures there. I hadn't seen one move from its hookups since I had rented my own fixer upper mobile home there.

Rent was cheap and I could walk to work. I couldn't say much else about

my place. Someone had painted it a cheerful robin egg blue and made a brick planter around the front, but the inside had cheap wood paneling and pale yellow linoleum floor. The kitchen was tiny. The green appliances looked straight out of the seventies. The bathroom had an old cabinet, a rusted undersized tub, and a water supply that trickled sporadically out of an old faucet. My furniture was all used and covered with throws designed to cover serious wear marks. When people asked me what my place was like I gave it descriptions like homey, quaint, and the usual beach bum shack. They were all better descriptions than dive and should be condemned. The reality was that it was one strong wind from being scrap.

When I was younger I had dreams of lazing on the beaches and selling my art. That novel would write itself, get published, and pay all my bills. I'd hook up with a Bohemian wife and she would wear beads in her hair, gypsy skirts, and love everything I did. I had even planned on at least one kid, the kind that raised themselves and became artists as well. That robin egg colored single wide mobile home, with the tiny cement porch under a metal awning, the two beach chairs, and the sandy front yard was supposed to be the beginning of things, not the home that defined my failure every time I took the rusty metal steps up to the front door.

Those kinds of thoughts should have spurred me to change my circumstances. They should have shamed me into pulling out my paints or opening that word processing program. I should have at least tried to write page six of that novel. Instead, I pulled a can of soda out of the refrigerator, a bag of chips from inside a kitchen cabinet, and sat on the couch. I stared at the blank television, too depressed to even turn it on.

Southern sunsets are beautiful. When the sun begins to dip towards the horizon everything gets painted orange, yellow, and red. The lingering blue of the sky becomes intense and the rays of the sun concentrate and make a person think of miracles about to happen, about light from Heaven itself. Inside my single wide mobile home, that light made everything blood red, the

light coming in harshly through old windows. It looked more like judgment day than angels descending from Heaven. It drove me outside to sit on my tiny porch in one of my aluminum beach chairs where things looked less apocalyptic.

My neighbors were not quiet. I could hear television shows, talk radio, different kinds of music from radios, and loud talk up and down the park. People went by on bicycles, golf carts, and cars that looked held together by duct tape, body repair patch, and wishful thinking. After years of living there, I could tune it all out. I could stare over the roof of my neighbor's RV and concentrate on the sky, the clouds, a seagull gliding over occasionally, and a slight breeze too stubborn to allow the heat of the day to extinguish its coolness.

The chair to my right creaked as someone sat down. I heard the panting of a dog... no, a wolf... and turned my head with trepidation to see the beast settle at the feet of the beach chair and the old man who sat in it.

I sat up straight and put my drink aside on a rickety folding table. "Uh, look. I'm not sure..." I wasn't sure what to say. Was the old man crazy? Demented? A stalker? I couldn't imagine why he had decided to follow me home and sit next to me. His wolf was smiling at me and I remembered the old man saying, wolves smile when they kill you.

"Nothing to be worried about," the old man said soothingly as he looked at me and winked. "I just have to set the record straight. I didn't tell the truth back there in your shop."

I mentally scrambled for a reply, but ingrained politeness decided that an inane comment was needed. "That's okay. You didn't have to come and apologize."

"I did," the old man insisted and looked troubled. He nodded to the wolf. "I told you, he reminds me of my arrogance. My pride has kept me silent a long time. People believe a lie about me and they tell it proudly to their children, to their wives, to their friends, to their-

“I’m sure it’s not that bad,” I replied, desperate to hasten his departure by curtailing his obvious need to reveal his failings to me.

I thought of standing up, but I wasn’t sure how the wolf or the old man would react if I ran into the house and called the police. I thought about shouting for help from my neighbors, but I wasn’t sure what I would say. The old man hadn’t threatened me in anyway. He was being very friendly. I wasn’t certain that trespassing and having a conversation constituted endangerment. Even the wolf was stretching out as if he intended to take a nap. Maybe if I let the old man say what he wanted, he would go away without any trouble?

“I’ll tell you the truth,” the old man said and nodded as if coming to a hard decision. “You’ll write about it and they’ll read it. They’ll recognize my name. I can put this lie to rest even though I’m replacing it with a truth that will make them ashamed of me.”

I swallowed hard, suddenly feeling my own kind of shame. “Did you hear that I was a writer? I really haven’t sold anything. In fact, I have an unfinished novel. I haven’t found the time to pursue it.”

“You’ll write it,” the old man insisted with another firm nod, as if he were confirming the existence of the universe.

“Okay,” I replied, though I didn’t really believe him. My goal was to make the old man happy, so that he would leave with the dangerous wolf.

“I was riding my horse,” the old man began and looked down at his clasped hands between his knees. His hands gripped each other hard enough that I could see the veins stand out strongly. “I was drunk.” He looked sideways at me and shook his head ruefully. “You see? Everyone thinks Indians are drunks. Who wants to say that their ancestor had one too many with his friends, fell off his horse on the way home, broke his leg, and gave the wolves a tough and stringy meal? Much better to say; my ancestor went wolf hunting one night when he was as old as the trees. He was a brave man even though the wolves ate him.”

The wolf growled and lifted a lip to show sharp teeth. An amber eye rolled

to look up at the old man. He looked back and sighed.

“Tell them,” the old man said as he stood up and the wolf rose with him. “Tell them Thomas Pane was a foolish old man who died a stupid death.”

“Thomas Pane?” I was confused. I had been expecting a hard to pronounce Native American name.

“That’s the one that’s on paper,” the old man said with a tired shrug. “Not many know the tribe names any more. Don’t worry. They’ll know me when they read it.”

“Still, maybe you could just tell me your real name?” I insisted, though I wasn’t sure why.

“Chakahtewa,” the old man told me with a grimace that made the lines deeper in his face. “That’s my last truth.”

The wolf yawned, stretched, and trotted away. The old man watched it go, grunted, and turned to me fully. “Write the story,” he insisted as he plucked a pecan log seemingly out of thin air from behind my ear. “Before I go, tell me what this tastes like.”

It took it with a slightly shaking hand. The wrapper felt cold to the touch, as if it had just come out of the box at the souvenir shop. I wondered if he had stolen it and then didn’t care. I just wanted the man to leave. I opened the wrapper with fumbling fingers and took a bite. It was chewy and not bad.

“It’s okay,” I mumbled around my mouthful. “Peanuts, of course, and a sweet nougat that tastes like... vanilla and caramel.”

“Ah,” the man seemed satisfied. He nodded and smiled as if I had imparted long sought after knowledge.

“Jack?”

The feminine voice made me start. I turned with my mouth full of pecan log and saw my girlfriend walking toward me. A full figured blonde, she was dressed in a bikini top and very short shorts. She was frowning in concern.

“Who are you talking to?” she asked.

I turned back toward the old man and found myself looking at my

neighbor's RV and the last rays of the setting sun. Solar lights were beginning to come on, including the ones on my small porch. Between the homes, I could see sand, weeds, and the occasional lawn ornament, but nothing of the old man or the wolf.

I didn't feel a second of superstitious unease. My feet were firmly planted in the reality of my life. I was experiencing annoyance, instead. I was irritated that the old man had managed to leave and make me look foolish in front of my girlfriend.

I swallowed my bite of pecan log and replied, "Talking to myself." I tucked the remainder of the pecan log into the breast pocket of my shirt.

She rolled her eyes in a silent comment on the weirdness of artists/authors. She then lifted up a wooden wind chime, the kind my shop sold by the dozens with pink flamingo and blue dolphin toppers. This one had the pink flamingo topper. The wood clattered together in the slight breeze as she tied it to the low awning of my porch.

"Happy Birthday," she said and made a wide motion with her hands as if she had given me a grand piece of art and was proud of her choice. Her expression was saying something different. It was nervous and she was still frowning.

"It's my birthday?" For a moment I thought I had lost a few days, but I checked my mental calendar. "My birthday is three days from now."

"I know that," she replied. She stuck her hands in to the tight pockets of her tight shorts and gave me an apologetic look.

That didn't bode well. I sat back in my chair, knowing that I was about to hear bad news.

I didn't usually think too hard about our relationship and that probably said a lot about what state it was in. We had met at the souvenir shop several years ago when my boss had decided to hire her as a floor clerk. Cynthia had quickly moved onto better things at the Ice cream shop three doors down when she had discovered that our boss was an in fact an asshole. She had kept

coming to the shop anyway. She liked my artistic mystique, as she had put it. It certainly wasn't for my good looks. I wasn't bad, but I was a bit too thin for my height, had a thatch of straight black hair, and large droopy, dark eyes, that gave me a permanent look of not having slept in far too long. I could look the part of the tormented artist, though, by tying my hair back in a fashionable pony tail and wearing beach bum bead necklaces and woven bracelets. It was inevitable that Cynthia would eventually realize that I wasn't an artist on the verge of breaking into the international scene, but a man who had settled and, for all appearances, given up on those dreams.

"I think we should stay friends," Cynthia announced as she rocked on her heels and stared at the crushed shells and sand under her sandals. Her hair fell softly over her face, but it didn't hide the nervous twist of her lips.

I glared, feeling a stronger sense of annoyance than any sort of devastation. "Is this your breakup speech? It could use work. Maybe you should have practiced a little more. I would have started off by saying you're a great guy, Jack. Any woman would feel lucky to be with you. Maybe something after that about how it's me and not you, Jack..."

"Well, it is kind of you, Jack, and not me," she replied as if it were a joke. She tucked her loose hair behind one ear and looked up at me. Yes, she was smiling now. "I like a lot more... excitement. I didn't think dating an artist could be so... well... boring."

"I'm boring?" I scrubbed at the back of my neck and really glared now. I didn't have a defense. She was right. We never did anything except swim on the beach, watch a movie occasionally, and talk about our respective jobs.

"You like that," she stressed, as if that made it all right. Not for her though. "You need someone who's more of a home-body."

Home-body? I refrained from repeating it. I didn't want to sound like an echo. Instead, I went to the meat of the heart to heart we were having. "So you're breaking up with me? Have you found someone else?"

Her smile broadened and she suddenly had dreamy eyes. She was definitely

seeing someone in her mind's eye that I didn't measure up to. "You know him. It's Kurt from Beach Bum men's clothing shop."

I did know him. He sold shirts and shorts to tourists, along with the usual tourist trinkets like towels with funny pictures, shell jewelry made out of plastic and string, and can huggers with the name of the closest beach on them. I had been under the impression that he was gay, due to the other weight lifting, suntan lotion wearing specimens of manhood that often frequented his shop. My inferiority complex about my own thin body always went up a hundred notches when I had to reach between their rippling biceps to get to the stacks of 3 for \$5.00 t-shirts in small. There was also the name of the shop: Beach Bum. I'll confess that I was making the stretch and creating the innuendo based on my own hope that he was gay. I hated having that much competition right across from where my girlfriend worked.

"Kurt is more exciting than I am?" I was finding that hard to believe. The man never went further than the beach, the gym, and now, presumably, my girlfriend's house.

I stood up abruptly and said briskly, "Never mind!" That was to stop her from opening up the throttle and traveling top speed down the highway that I had left wide open for her. Not being exciting could mean two things. One of those meanings that I hadn't considered until that moment was the one having to do with sexual performance. I was not going there and neither was she.

I brushed my hands along my sides as if I needed to get sand off my palms. "This is perfect timing. Really it is. I'm going on a long trip. I probably will be gone most of the year. I'm painting and writing a novel. It's going to be an artist's travelogue of sorts about the country. A relationship just wouldn't work right now. I wasn't sure how I was going to tell you. I'm glad you have Kurt."

I was babbling. I didn't have any intention of going anywhere. The outdoors were for people like Kurt; someone with muscles, stamina, and

Neanderthal genes close to the surface. I was a skinny man who hadn't taken a walk longer than the distance between my home and work in far too long.

Cynthia was surprised. "You didn't say anything..." She tucked her hair back behind her ear again, even though it was securely tucked already. She looked uncomfortable. Maybe no one had rejected her before. I could almost feel good about that small dose of revenge, but I was too busy wondering how I was going to explain away the lie when I didn't actually go anywhere.

Cynthia rallied herself and smiled again. She looked relieved. "Well, all right then. I was afraid you might take it hard. I'm glad this all worked out for the best. We are growing as people, moving on with our lives, and finding what we really want."

She wanted Kurt. I wasn't sure what I wanted, but I knew it didn't have anything to do with suffering along a back road with a map, a backpack, and artistic intentions.

"Yes, everything is turning out for the best," I agreed, when I was really thinking that everything was turning out extremely bad for me. "We can stay friends. You can bring Kurt over."

That was more babbling and we both looked uncomfortable at the prospect of the three of us spending any time together.

"But you'll be gone," Cynthia reminded me with the same desperation as someone grabbing a lifeline and pulling themselves out of a pool of sharks. "Months, you said. You probably won't even remember me by the time you come back here."

I didn't like how she sounded so hopeful for that outcome.

"You are truly unforgettable, Cynthia," I replied and didn't mean that in a good way.

Maybe she sensed it and realized that it was time for her to make her exit out of my life. She rocked on her heels again, gave me an almost pained look, and said, "I suppose all of your things will be in storage until you get back?"

"I suppose they will," I replied, not knowing anything of the sort.

She reached up and took down my birthday gift. The wood chimes clattered together as she said, "I'll hold onto this for you. No reason to spend money to store it. Have a safe trip, Jack. I hope it all works out for you."

"Thanks," I replied as she made her exit, churning sand and crushed seashells in her wake as she left my life, probably for good. The sound of the wood chimes clattering together continued for a few moments after she turned the corner around another trailer and was out of sight.

I sighed and scrubbed hands over my face in disgust. How embarrassing. I looked to see if anyone had witnessed my humiliation. It was then that I saw the old man's wolf. It was standing a long way off, barely visible between trailers, but it was clear that it was staring right at me. Its tongue lolled out of its mouth and it looked like it was smiling. Between one blink and the next, it was gone.

Wolves smile when they kill you.