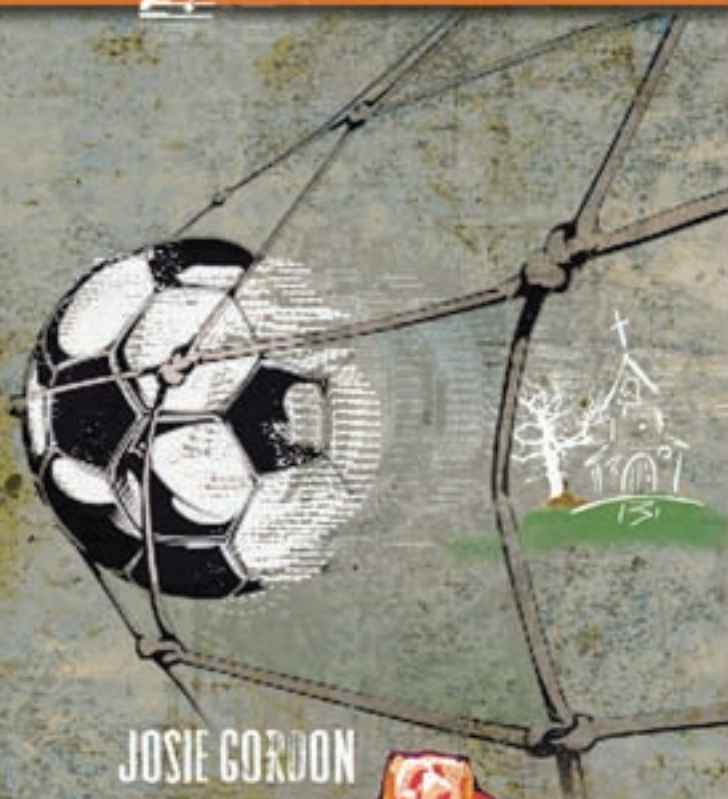


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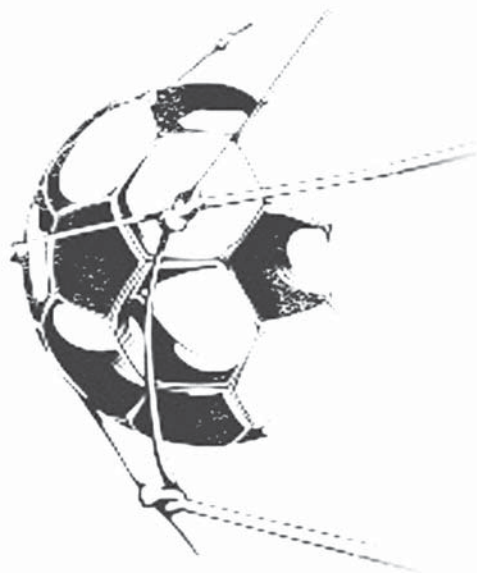


JOSIE GORDON





# WHACKEED



JOSIE GORDON



Bella  
BOOKS

2008

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P.O. Box 10543  
Tallahassee, FL 32302

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First Edition 2008

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper

Editor: Cindy Cresap  
Cover designer: Kiara Creative Ltd.

ISBN-10: 1-59493-139-9  
ISBN-13: 978-1-59493-139-0

## Acknowledgments

In writing this book I've had the greatest imaginative fun taking liberties with the geography of Michigan's west coast, with its history and with the structure of the Episcopal Church. Although many of these things really exist, they are used here only fictionally. As far as I know, no one in Michigan or in the Episcopal Church engages in the sorts of activities depicted here—except in my imagination.

My thanks to those without whom this book could not exist, those who listened and read and tried to teach me technicalities about head wounds and side tackles and hairstyling with patience bordering on the holy: Rhoda, Trisha, Cindy H., Lori, Carla, Devon, Cathy, Pat, Craig, Cindy Cresap (editor extraordinaire) and most of all Jen. Any errors in this text are mine, not theirs.

Special thanks to my entire family who cheers me as if writing were a soccer game and understands all those times I say, "Sorry, I can't. I have to write."

If I were a beauty pageant contestant, instead of wishing for world peace, I'd wish for everyone to have a partner like Jen—it would amount to the same thing as world peace, but cuter and with a lot more laughs.

Special thanks to readers who pick up this first book in a new mystery series. Without you, I couldn't do what I do. At [www.josiegordon.com](http://www.josiegordon.com) I blog when I can and post updates on my writing. Hope to see you there!

Watch for the second Lonnie Squires mystery, *Toasted*, coming in 2009!

*For NanaPauli  
For Jen  
And for those throughout the Anglican communion who labor on  
behalf of  
inclusivity, justice and peace*

## About the Author

Recently, Josie Gordon learned to tread water upside down so that she could listen to humpback whales sing in the channel off Maui. This inverted perspective opened up a miraculous hidden world—exactly the sort of thing she strives to do in her writing and in her teaching about writing. Josie has explored mystery stories since she began writing fan scripts as a pre-teen for the television series *Police Woman*. Eventually, she earned her Ph.D. in literature with a dissertation on women detectives.

Once, she found a dead body in the woods. And though every amateur sleuth she has ever encountered in books or on TV would seize the chance to march right up and investigate, Josie ran like the dickens in the other direction! Later, while waiting for the police, she resolved to write a book in which the sleuth would be as freaked out by finding a dead guy as she was.

Josie loves to sing in choirs, play the Irish whistle, drum, make a mess with paints on canvas (she can't call it "art") and volunteer with her German shepherds in local hospitals and care centers. She lives in the woods with her partner and loves to spend time hiking or just sitting where there are more trees than people.

*Whacked* is the first Lonnie Squires mystery. *Toasted*, the second Lonnie Squires mystery, is due in 2009.

You can learn more at [www.josiegordon.com](http://www.josiegordon.com).



## Chapter One

It was one of those moments when I think I should quit the priesthood.

Thursday, May 14. 10:43 a.m.

Yes, I looked at the clock. It's a habit I picked up watching seventies cop show reruns with my dad. Got a crisis? Check a clock. You never know when you'll be required to account for your whereabouts.

And though this crisis wasn't a murder—at least, not at 10:43—it did involve a crazy woman. And crazy women scare me to death.

The morning had gone well. I knew I had Friday off to travel to a soccer reunion, and I had a lingering lunch planned with Jamie at Navy Pier, so even the chaos in the Little Lambs pre-kindergarten room hadn't strung me out. As vice principal of the Hyde Park Episcopal Primary School, I'd had to step in to run a class during an emergency absence of a teacher before. And

I'd seen worse than Melissa Booer vomiting Cheerios all over Chelsea Schimoff's stuffed pink poodle, Bunny. I'd remained steady in the path of Chelsea's cataclysmic meltdown as I put Bunny in the washer. But Jacqueline Booer's response to my phone call requesting that she come pick up her puking kid snapped my pulse to a whirring high.

"I asked you," she said, "to explain to me exactly how abandoning a three-year-old in her hour of need is Christian. Or educational? You're supposed to be both, and you're doing a pretty lousy job."

*Warning, Will Robinson!* (I'd watched a lot of sixties sci-fi in reruns with my dad too). *Insane woman. Illogical. Normal human reasoning may cause disaster. Red alert!*

I wanted to tell her that she was the one doing a lousy job. I wanted to fling some Bible verse back at her about how mothers should pick up their sick kids so everyone else in the school didn't get sick, but I couldn't think of one. I can never think of a Bible verse when I need one.

"Do I need to chat with the bishop," she continued, "about how you're running things? He and I belong to the same sailing club, you know."

I wanted to tell her to get off her righteous horse and drive her shiny new Hummer from Chicago's Magnificent Mile straight down Lake Shore and across 57th Street to pick up her kid, damn it. Or to help her understand how much her little girl loved her and that only a mother's touch would soothe the tummy ache. But instead I hid behind the reinforced wall of policy.

"Pre-kindergarten policy requires that potentially contagious children must be picked up immediately by a parent or else admission to the class can be revoked." I paused. "The bishop will remind you of that when you speak to him, I'm sure."

Okay, that was a dig. I shouldn't have done it. It probably didn't help matters later. But I wanted to kick something and my ball was in the car.

"Your ability to cite policy does not impress me," Mrs. Booer snapped, but said she'd be there as soon as she could.

One *Veggie Tales* tape later, Melissa still lay white-faced on her little cot and Christine, the pre-kindergarten intern from the high school, had dispersed juice packs to soothe the other eight who glanced nervously between Melissa and Chelsea who had not yet stopped sniffing over the absence of Bunny. At 11:17 the dryer beeped, and I flew across the room to reunite poodle and puffy kid. I reminded myself that in forty-five minutes I'd have Jamie's soft brown eyes all to myself. Anything to divert my growing fury at Melissa's absent mom.

"And heeeeeeeere's Bunny!" I shouted, sweeping the still warm Bunny across the room like Underdog into Chelsea's waiting arms.

"Hooray!" Christine shouted.

"Hooray!" the other kids shouted in response.

Wanting to seal the celebration, sloppy-nosed Kiera Macon, who had clutched her blanket to her chest throughout Chelsea's distress, leaned in and planted a kiss on Bunny's head.

"Mine!" Chelsea cried, pulling Bunny closer.

"It's okay, Chelsea," I said, the embodiment of peace and goodwill. I couldn't mentor Jacqueline Boover into compassionate behavior, but I could this three-year-old. I flicked the stray strands that had escaped my ponytail. "Kiera just wants to love you and Bunny."

Encouraged, Kiera leaned in to grant another kiss to Bunny. That's when tiny Chelsea, she of tear-filled lashes, hauled back and slugged Kiera with a prize-fighter's wallop. I swooped the wailing Kiera out of range as Chelsea wound up for a second punch, but failed to secure the cherry juice box the now sobbing Kiera held too loosely in a sticky hand.

Of course, an enormous and irrevocable stain is exactly what I deserved for wearing my new cashmere sweater to work. God whacks the prideful square on the backside of the head, Aunt Kate used to say. I'd wanted to look fabulous for lunch with Jamie. The pale yellow sweater had deepened the chestnut highlights in my otherwise black hair, and I'd thought, *it's just a few hours. I can feel attractive all morning.*

Was it too much to ask to wear nice clothes to work once in a while?

*Whack!*

As I handed Kiera off to Christine and grabbed a wad of rough brown paper towels to blot my sweater, I fought the urge to run, to escape the Little Lambs.

“Hey, Lonnie?” Christine said. “Check it out. That stain looks like the Virgin Mary in profile, or something?”

I just stared at her.

“Or maybe it looks like Satan, wearing a hoodie, or something?” She stood, hip cocked to hold the still sniffing Kiera against the red sweatshirt of the high school cross country team. In three months, when she started college, she’d be free of all this.

I looked at the mirror hung over the toddler room sink. It was tilted down, so toddlers could see themselves, so we adults had to duck to see our hair. But from my six foot even height, all I could see was the straight edge of my hair hanging over my collarbone and one big red blot. I couldn’t see a resemblance to either Virgin or Devil.

“Or maybe it’s a sign? That something really, really...” She paused. “Really bad is going to happen to you? Or something?”

“Something bad already has.” I blotted with renewed ferocity. “How about a bright side?” I needed a bright side, something to show this wasn’t a waste of my double major in psychology and religion, my Master’s of Divinity degree, my ordination. I spent my days in rooms filled with dancing Elmos and *Veggie Tales* DVDs under fluorescent lights that brought out my crow’s feet and sparkling new gray hairs. I was almost thirty-five, for God’s sake. There had to be a bright side.

“You could, maybe, sell it on eBay, or something?” Christine suggested, shifting Kiera.

Maybe, if it looked like Jesus and wept.

“Oh, hey, that reminds me?” Christine set Kiera down and dug into the pockets of her low, tight jeans. “When you were in the laundry or something I took this message?” She handed me a

folded piece of construction paper.

I stared at the message written in large loop letters with a fat purple marker. *j says no lunch. meeting. late tonite. so sorry.*

“So does that mean you aren’t going out for lunch? Because if not, then can I?”

“I’m leaving now,” I said. “Have Sheila come in from the office to give you a hand.” I wadded the towels with a two-fisted clutch.

Christine blinked. “But you said twelve to two. It’s only eleven forty. I can’t—”

“Handle them, Christine, okay?” Toddler babble washed over me. “Just do your job and handle them.”

I bull’s-eyed the wad into the trashcan with a behind-the-back toss, but didn’t pause to celebrate. With a glance down at the red stain on my chest, I grabbed my tote and got the hell out of there.

## Chapter Two

Outside the narrow brownstone building, I charged south on Everett Street, hating the uneven sidewalk, loathing the trash in the street and my environmentally stunted neighbors who'd thrown it there. Sun-heated air swept out of my old Honda Civic as I reached in to drop the tote and grab my sneakers. I yanked my hair back into a ponytail loop, switched shoes, scooped up my soccer ball and jogged back to the school, a converted apartment building which horseshoed around a small lawn in front and had alleys on either side and in the back. I unlocked the black iron security fence, then dropped the ball and slammed it into the side wall near the second floor fire escape. It bounced away, and I tore down the alley after it. I trapped the ball with my foot, then picked up an unbroken schnapps bottle. So much for keeping people out of the alley.

I aimed for a spot just below the stairway's first platform and kicked hard. The ball went high and slammed into it, returning

at a sharp angle. As I chased it, a black Hummer pulled past the alley and double-parked. Jacqueline Booer jumped out in front of a passing car which laid on one long, angry honk. My foot jiggled on the ball as she stormed into the building.

I should go in and deal with her face-to-face. Be a man, so to speak.

I studied the empty bottle in my hand, then dribbled toward the Dumpster beyond the stairs. I was doing the right thing, the wise thing, staying out here. I'd snapped at poor Christine. No telling what I'd say to Mrs. Booer and then live to regret. *Plus she's crazy. Sheila can handle it.*

I stood near the fence where I could see her car, tapping the ball with my foot. Only a few minutes passed before the woman appeared, dragging Melissa by the hand, followed by Sheila.

"—completely unacceptable for the money I'm paying," Mrs. Booer said. "Supposed to support family values!" She yanked open the back door of the car. "*Families* value two parents working." She slung her toddler into its depths. "We *value* reliable day care."

"I understand your frustration, Mrs. Booer," Sheila said evenly, her face the picture of calm, her blouse unstained. "But this is not a day-care center. It's a school."

So much better than me. I'd be screaming at her to be gentle to her poor sick kid.

Mrs. Booer mumbled something from inside the car, then stood up straight. "Call yourselves Christian. I'll tell that to the bishop too!"

*Righteous hag*, I thought, then immediately glanced skyward. *Sorry.*

"That would take a lot of time," Sheila said, closing the door on Melissa. "Perhaps I could take care of that for you, by contacting the bishop and asking him to review the policy for children who become ill during the day." She held the front door while Mrs. Booer strapped in.

I didn't hear any more, just watched the Hummer sail away while Sheila waved. When it had turned onto 57th, Sheila glanced at my Civic, then at the alley. I didn't move from my hiding

spot, but she knew. She waved a big thumb's up in my direction. "Disaster averted," she hollered, then practically skipped back into the center.

God love her. She ought to be vice principal instead of me. She would be too, if only I could get that rector's job in Oak Brook.

I picked up a squashed Starbucks cup between my thumb and forefinger. I'd submitted my résumé months ago for the rector's opening at St. Gregory's Episcopal in Oak Brook. It was perfect, the only rector's job I'd found that I could commute to. Moving was out of the question, with Jamie's laser surgery clinic just getting rolling. We'd found the perfect condo in Streeterville, and once things got settled, she'd have normal hours, not the torture routine that the hospital had put her through. The school administrative gig supported us through the clinic's start-up and had got me working in the local diocese, a sure first step into a rectorship, I'd figured.

It had been thirty months, twenty-nine past my discovery that school administration, while worthy, was not what God put me on earth to do. And the only local pastoral job open in all that time was the one at St. Greg's, so I'd put a lot of hope into it. All these weeks, and I still hadn't heard anything.

I stared at the lipstick stain on the cup's edge, felt the sweat trickle down my back and into my new sweater. I had on worn sneakers beneath dry-clean only camel pants and a scuffed black and white soccer ball tucked under my arm. I was hiding in an alley that smelled like the bad parts of an old locker room from a crazy mom with a souped-up gas guzzler because I didn't want her to say anything even sort of bad about me to my bishop and hurt my chances for a new job. I'd snapped at Christine, and worse, left her alone in charge of the Little Lambs.

Maybe it was the red blot on my heart, but I just couldn't take it anymore. I had to quit. Just call my bishop and explain, then talk to Carol, the principal, and quit. Sheila could run the place better than me, and they could survive short-handed a little while.

I tossed the cup into the Dumpster, heard it hit plastic bags below. I could call and quit right now and head off to my soccer reunion tomorrow and never *ever* have to come back.

I'd be free.

The bubbling that thought sent through my veins lasted only a second until my stomach tightened and I slumped against the building's wall. Imagine explaining that to Jamie. I could see her disappointment, feel my failure to support her as she built her dream. I had agreed to do it this way, and I was no quitter. No way.

But how many more days, months, years with the kids and their moms?

*Help, help, help*, I prayed.

I expected no voice from above and got none, so I tried to think of someone to ask for help who might actually answer me. I knew Jamie'd say the same thing she said last time I mentioned quitting. *But, babe, you do such a great job with the kids. Plus it pays the rent and the Audi lease, helps with the lobby magazines, keeps food in the refrigerator—the clinic isn't making much yet. But it will soon, babe. Then you can quit.* Mom would tell me to follow my heart and ignore the bills. Dad would offer to buy me a Coke and sip his own with me in companionable silence while looking for *M\*A\*S\*H* reruns. My older sister Cassie would roll her eyes and assure me my life held nothing like the traumas of trying to find the right brand of vanilla almond milk in the new Kroger's or getting four kids to various practices and rehearsals. My younger sister Annie wouldn't pick up and wouldn't call back.

*You're a wimp, is your problem.* That's what my Aunt Kate would say, if I asked her, which I never would, not only because she'd been dead for thirteen years but because she was crazy and mean. *Most people don't like their jobs, so why do you think you deserve to love yours? Answer me!*

I shook my head to clear her voice and tapped the ball gently against the wall. I had to get Jamie to understand how miserable this made me, then she'd want me to quit. I unclipped my cell phone and speed dialed the clinic. Mary, the receptionist I'd

never met, told me that Dr. Wollsey had already left for a lunch meeting.

She was having lunch with someone—just not me.

I wondered who? Which other doctor? Or attorney? Or insurance agent? Or drug salesperson? The list always went on and on when Jamie cancelled.

No, I didn't want to leave a message. I hung up and nailed the ball into the back of the alley so hard I thought the brick might shake. Everything sucked.

I ran down the alley to touch the ball and kicked it hard again. These walls don't suck, I thought as I chased and kicked again. They're reliable, they send the ball back. I kicked again. And again and again and again. Soon my sweater hung on me like a used bath towel, and my ears rang from the echo of leather smacking brick. I leaned over, my hands on my knees, feeling all of thirty-four and out of shape.

I needed to find a soccer team again.

Then I had a sudden vision of my old team, the Well's Belles, the ladies I'd see tomorrow in Michigan. I imagined them standing in a huddle at the alley gate looking at me all red-faced and puffing in my dress clothes, kicking balls inside this cell instead of at a park or on a pitch. Having my own toddler-esque cataclysmic fit. I could just see Marion's face puckered up in that motherly way of hers, tsk-tsking me.

*I'm a complete nutcase.*

I picked up the ball and headed out of the alley. I would dry off as best I could, pick up two orders of fried catfish from the stand on 56th, then get my butt back in there and give one to Christine. Then I'd be a good vice principal until five o'clock. Tomorrow, I'd get up bright and early and escape east around Lake Michigan to see my soccer gals. The Woman at the Well Episcopal Church team I'd played with during all those summers I'd spent with Aunt Kate. The only thing that kept me sane then—maybe they'd help restore my sanity now. It was the fifteenth reunion of our crazy come-from-behind church conference victory that made us all small town celebrities. These ladies had been my family when my

real family was falling apart. They'd help me figure out how to survive. Marion would help me figure out how to convince Jamie that I wasn't reneging on a commitment by quitting this job.

And we'd play soccer. Thank God. There was just something about soccer. It reminded you who you were, made solving problems easier. Tomorrow, I'd see the girls, run up and down the pitch, drink a few beers and figure life out. No problem.

## Chapter Three

I was rumbling east on I-94, west of New Buffalo just before ten in the morning, when my cell rang. “Diocese of the Lakeshore” said the caller ID. Not my diocese. A Michigan area code. I wrestled with my vacation state of mind for three rings, then picked up.

Once she clarified I was me, the nasal lady asked me to, “Hold, please, for the Right Reverend Bishop Craig Tappen.”

I snapped off my CD player. Any dude self-important enough to have his secretary introduce him with all his titles like that probably didn’t want to talk to me with John Denver caroling about *Calypso* in the background.

“I have a situation at one of my parishes, and I’ve noted your excellent work on church reconciliation.” His voice deep, hyper-announced and matter-of-fact, the Right Reverend Bishop Craig Tappen didn’t bother with pleasantries. “I may want to hire you as a consultant.”

*Yes!* I pumped my fist and looked up at the dingy car ceiling. *Thank you!* Any work I could do with him would beef up my chances at St. Greg's, especially if he could give me a great reference.

"I've spoken to the rector at St. Francis in Schenectady," he said.

"I was interim rector for two years, straight out of seminary." An unusual accomplishment and I wanted to be sure he knew.

"I've seen your articles on reconciliation and, in fact, I heard you speak in Atlanta on the subject."

I loved him. He didn't want to talk to me about vaccinations or policies or achievement tests, but about my real work as a priest!

"I've noticed you haven't done anything lately," he added.

Just met Jamie, moved to Chicago, started reconciling dueling toddlers. And running from their mothers. I shook my head. *What is happening to me?* "Not in print," I said, "no."

"The parish I have in mind is one you're familiar with, I believe. Woman at the Well Episcopal. In Middelburg, Michigan."

"Seriously?" *Hell of a coincidence.* "I'm headed there right now. For a soccer reunion."

"I know that," the bishop said.

*Of course, dummy. Why else would he call you when you haven't done anything lately?*

"What I don't know," he said, "is if you are available to consider such a position—a limited time working intensely with the congregation? Can you free yourself from your current position?"

"Yes! I can drive back anytime to meet—"

"There's an important meeting this morning at eleven. Come straight to the parish house."

"I have another appointment at eleven." Early lunch with the girls, a picnic at the beach. "In fact, I'm previously committed through the weekend. But perhaps Monday morning?" I could probably talk my way into Monday off.

"Today at eleven. Go to the parish house as soon as you

arrive. Try not to be late.”

Suddenly, I loved the Right Reverend Bishop Craig Tappen a lot less. It was my soccer weekend, the first time I’d been back to Middelburg since Aunt Kate died, the first time I’d seen most of my teammates since our championship. And this guy—he didn’t even know where I was and he wanted me in his space in an hour.

On the other hand, I loved Woman at the Well and wondered about the trouble. That community had given me so much, how could I not help? Plus, working with them would give me an excuse to call St. Greg’s, update my résumé, get it to the top of their pile again. Maybe even earn a little bishop-to-bishop plug on my behalf.

And, I had to admit, curiosity chewed at me. I’d talked to Marion, one of my best friends and former team stopper, on the phone three times in the last month. She had her thumb on all the Middelburg gossip, and she hadn’t mentioned trouble with the church. Heck, I didn’t even know anything about the rector who’d taken over nearly a dozen years ago when Father Edward retired.

Well, I’d certainly see plenty of the girls this weekend if I missed just one lunch.

“I’ll be there,” I said and the bishop hung up.

I tried to call Marion, but she didn’t pick up, so I left her a message about it all and said I’d catch up with them later. I didn’t know anyone else to call for more information, but after a minute, I decided it didn’t matter. I switched John back on and sang along about working in the service of life and searching for the answers to questions.

I was on my way to what Aunt Kate used to call a Divine Surprise Party. You’re the guest, but you don’t know what the surprise is. *Okey doke, Divine, I’ll go along.* I set the cruise a little higher and felt the highway click a little faster under my tires as I sped past a newly turned field, the color of fudge, with a dark green tractor rumbling down the line planting rows of who knew what.

## Chapter Four

*These people are whacked*, I thought as the church meeting exploded with me at the epicenter. *I should be on a beach drinking wine and kicking a ball.*

“Perhaps, Reverend Squires, you don’t understand what’s at stake here.” The raspberry wool-suited speaker and pointer of one long-nailed index finger was Middelburg Councilwoman Star Hannes, who had stood in her excitement, though the rest of us remained seated.

“I understand what’s at stake for the parish, yes,” I said. “But I don’t understand your involvement in—”

“It’s not about the parish. It’s about the future of our town.” She paused, made sure everyone was paying attention. “My goal is to save us from the fates of so many small municipalities. Increased poverty, shrinking tax base, sinking property values, shattered educational system, destroyed—”

“Reverend Squires understands,” said Bishop Tappen, his

voice as deep as the purple of his clergy shirt, as heavy as the enormous silver pectoral cross that hung on his sternum, as stiff as his plastic clergy collar.

I took the next moment of silence to glance about the meeting room. The parish hall was an old Victorian clapboard house next door to the tiny church. The meeting room had once been the dining room, divided from the kitchen on one side and the front parlor on the other by eight-foot wooden sliding doors. Windows on one wall ran almost to the twelve-foot ceilings. Through the Dutch lace that hung there I could see the dark wood of the church only five feet or so away.

Star didn't take long to start up again. "Orion Gametech has listed us in their top three spots for the new location of their R and D Division. Middelburg *will* be chosen, I'll see to it." She planted her hands on her trim hips and stared at me. "And Middelburg's Family Values Celebration will simply crown their whole visit."

"That sounds great." I smiled. I wanted to hear less from her and more from the folks at the church. I needed to know more about how they'd gotten to the point of a split. It was the only way I'd know whether or not I could help this parish heal. Because if they didn't want help, didn't want to heal, it was a lost cause to get involved. I surely didn't want a failure on my résumé.

"I just don't understand," I continued, "why you're so deeply involved in the affairs of this congregation when you are not a member of the church." I also wanted to know why the rector and the bishop had permitted her to take over like this.

Someone snorted at the other end of the table, but I didn't look. I knew who it was—the last person on earth I'd expected to see when I walked into this church. The slug whose eyes I refused to meet.

Star's eyes narrowed at me. "Can you truly understand as an *outsider*?" And then she smirked at me. In front of nine other people, she actually smirked.

I glanced around the room to see if anyone looked as appalled as I felt. To my left, the bishop stared straight ahead,

hands folded on the table. Star still stood at the head of the table to his left. Beside her sat two other community representatives to this church meeting—their presence here still confused me. First was Mimi Manser, my former Belles left winger who had yet to look me in the eye. Second was Pastor Brady Wesselynk, who had introduced himself as the shepherd of something called the Frontline Church of Christ. To my right sat three folks from Woman at the Well: Claris McGavin, the gray wisp of a church secretary and rector's wife, Rector Peter McGavin, who clenched both his bushy black brows and his mustached mouth, and senior warden Kitty Gellar, who looked like an octogenarian with a bad jet black dye job.

At the far end of the table sat the three sources of all this trouble, at least as far as everyone else in the room was concerned. Two of them I'd never seen before and barely caught their first names: a bony guy named Jack with a brownish blond ponytail who said he counseled at the combined elementary/middle school, so I knew he deserved sainthood, and Isabella, a very Dutch, very blond, very big-toothed and high-cheeked woman. But the third, well, him I knew. Vance TerMolen. He who had snorted.

When we were teenagers, Vance wore black, smoked dope and recited Jack Kerouac *ad nauseum*. The Dope on dope, we'd called him. Still, most Middelburg girls found him exotic and gaggled themselves around him. Now, he still wore a black leather jacket, T-shirt and jeans, and still smoked dope if the size of his pupils was any indication. He used to wear a locking knife at his waist. Today he squeezed a red multi-tool knife like a worry stone.

The bishop had waved his hand at them when he'd introduced me to the room, saying, "These folks have it in their heads that they can break away from this parish and form another one right here in town. Been at it for months now, causing a lot of ruckus for nothing."

With Vance involved, I could believe that. Twenty years ago, he'd done just about everything under the sun, including some stuff bordering on the illegal, to get me to sleep with him. I hadn't thought of him for years, and now here he was. *Yuck*. My

skin felt like spiders had descended on threads to weave webs around me.

“Lonnie’s not an outsider.” Vance broke the silence that had followed Star’s smirk. “She has a lot of great memories from her summers here.” His baritone remained even, though he flipped his bangs like a twenty-year-old and winked at me. *Double yuck.*

“She is not Dutch,” Star said.

“We’re all Americans,” said Vance.

“Of Dutch heritage, then,” said Star without a glance toward Vance. “And she is not a member of the CLOSER church.” Star pronounced the acronym for the local denomination as in “Just a Closer Walk with Thee,” a hymn that used to play in every store downtown over and over.

“Her great-aunt, Katherine Squires, lived here most of her adult life. We must remember,” Brady said, his great puppy dog eyes sliding toward me with sympathy. After all, his church was nondenominational, not part of the CLOSER church either. “The last time she visited, she came to bury her aunt.”

Kate had always said people in this town had long memories, but holy cow. “And even if I were a total outsider, I’d ask the same question. Is it really best to try to convince someone to move his company here by misrepresenting yourselves?”

Star’s gaze moved from my face to my shirt—a U.S. Women’s Soccer tee. “And you’re an expert on self-representation?”

I scooted my chair closer to the table to better hide my pink nylon shorts and spangly lime green flip-flops. I hadn’t dressed for anything except soccer this weekend. Thank God I’d put on a bra when I left the condo this morning.

“Misrepresentation,” Vance formed the words around a slow grin, “is what these people do best.” He leaned forward and tapped one end of his knife on the table. “Want proof?” He rotated the knife and tapped the other end on the table.

“I may be the only one here telling the truth,” Star said turning to the bishop, “when I tell you that your church woes alarm and disgust the rest of the town. Middelburg is not a place where churches split.”

“Ho, no!” Vance laughed. “It’s this home of a splinter from a twig from a branch from a church. Split cubed.”

“Christ the Lord’s Own Sainted Elect Reformed Church,” Star said, “is a small but strong church which has adhered to traditional church teachings. The others broke away from us when they valued the world over faith.”

Vance wagged his eyebrows. “If you want to look at it that way, then same with us. We’re upholding the communion. By refusing to welcome women and homosexuals, Rector McGavin has led the Woman at the Well parish away from the faith.”

McGavin said nothing, which surprised me.

Star scowled. “No. CLOSER church has always focused on community. And purity. Exactly what you seek to destroy.”

Suddenly I remembered how Aunt Kate referred to the local church, pronouncing it to mean shutting, as in one who closes doors, or closes off people.

“What about love thy neighbor?” Isabella asked, her voice a weak flinch.

“If your right hand offend thee, cut it off,” said Brady from Frontline. “Matthew 5:30.” He talked too loud and too fast, like a hockey announcer. He had horsey teeth, tiny blue eyes and magnificent lashes.

How could anyone who flung Bible verses get gifted with those lashes? I hate verse flingers, probably because I’m jealous that I can’t do it. But mostly, I don’t think the Bible should be used as an assault weapon. It didn’t seem right that someone like that should have eyelashes that any woman would die for.

“It’d be pretty hard to be productive citizens if we cut off our offensive parts,” said Jack.

“Nobody’d have kids,” said Vance.

Everyone ignored him.

“We are good Christians,” Isabella said.

“And we’re done being a bunch of liberal pussies,” said Vance. Claris and Isabella flinched.

“Civility, please,” croaked Kitty, who didn’t look the least aghast. “This is a church.”

Vance tilted his head. "Parish house, Ms. Gellar. The church is next door." She ignored him as he aimed right back at Star. "We're breaking away because we are tired of hearing our rector proclaim from the pulpit that anyone who votes Democratic or welcomes people with differences should be blamed for wrecking the economy and threatening marriage and being unpatriotic and contaminating youth and whatever else you conservative lot want to blame us for." His leather jacket squeaked against the vinyl chair as he shifted.

"Yes," said Isabella.

"Indeed?" Star gazed down at him. "Well, as an elected leader of this community rather than some self-appointed troublemaker, I will not permit your uncontrolled spiritual descent to cast a shadow of impure depravity on CEO Orion's visit."

"Do you even know his first name? Do you know anything about him or what he might view as depravity?" Vance asked.

Star looked annoyed. "Christopher Orion, of course." She turned to me. "The son and grandson of the founders. Took over just a few months ago after the sudden death of his father. He is the one that moved Middelburg to the top of the list. They are a strong Christian family, very philanthropic with organizations interested in family values." She raised her eyebrows at Vance, daring him to challenge her knowledge again. "It's why they decided to move from California to the Midwest. Better place for families."

Vance tapped his knife again, working his jaw. I could see some smart-alecky remark forming there, but he stayed quiet.

Star flipped her hand casually. "Normally, I wouldn't care what your church did to itself. It's small enough. Split into tiny pieces and disappear if that's what God wants. But with a matter this crucial to the survival of this town at hand, I will not have gossip about a church split, about a radical congregation forming in this town, spoiling our presentation of our town, its purity and courage and faith and democracy. And, of course, its fine Dutch heritage."

"Pass the blanket," said Vance, pointing toward the Dutch

almond pastry in the center of the table. Only Claris McGavin, the rector's wife, missed—or ignored—his facetiousness and slid the platter to him. He didn't touch it, of course.

"We don't want trouble for the town," Isabella said. "We live here too, and we need jobs and growth, we know. But it needs to be a kind and loving place for our children."

"A place," Vance said, tapping the ends of his knife, "actually *acting* with courage and honesty."

Star's nostrils flared, and I rubbed my nose to hide my smile.

"So why don't you just butt out, Star?" Vance swiped his dangling locks from his eyes. "This is our business, not yours. Or yours, Brady."

Brady's cheeks reddened.

"Stop getting your undies in a twist about us," Vance continued, "pretending you and yours don't have your own issues." The knife tapped. "You don't want to make it harder for a new parish to form in this town." Tap. "Trust me." Tap. "You do not want to do that."

The smooth wool of Star's suit shifted as she folded her hands to best display the lacquered nails. I don't see how anyone keeps nails that long. I'd chip them all in an hour.

"A bunch of anti-Biblical liberals threatening to rend this church at the seams is certainly my business," said Star, "because it sullies the Christian vision upon which this town was founded."

"Nor is it part of our church vision," said the bishop.

"Nor is it in line with the town image we must present in the next week," Star said.

Vance leaned forward. "Guess what, boys and girls? Your agendas aren't driving this thing. This church is splitting, and there isn't a damned thing you can do about it."

*Okay.* That was my sign. No way was this church going to reconcile, at least not quickly. Evidently the priest was a bigot and the bishop clearly supported him. Some part of the congregation didn't want themselves subjected to that crap, and frankly, I could hardly blame them. While I'd certainly rather see them stay together, because that was the only way the liberals could

ever help the conservatives grow into a broader view, this looked like a lost cause. In fact, they made the Little Lambs look good. I'd finish out the meeting, thank the bishop for the opportunity and go play soccer. Some other way to get out of the school would come along. Something humanly possible, for instance. But definitely not this.

## Chapter Five

“Vance is right,” Jack said. Gray streaked his temples. “Middelburg needs a more open place to worship. Where everyone is welcome.”

I couldn’t disagree with that, but since his goal meant my failure, I couldn’t help. I’d just say thanks but no thanks, and get the heck out. I settled back in my chair.

“I suppose you would have us welcoming drug addicts,” Star said, “and rapists and child molesters into town as part of welcoming everyone. Muslims? Atheists? What would happen to Middelburg’s nearly non-existent crime rate then? Are you going to pay for more police? A bigger jail?”

Such “logic” made my blood surge through my legs—my feet danced in my flip-flops. “Jesus loved the fullness of all humanity. He loved the outcasts,” Vance said. “Don’t know much about Jesus, do you, Star, even for being *closer* to him?”

Mimi, who sat beneath perfectly coiffed tri-foiled hair that

matched Star's, gasped.

Star's lip curled slightly. "Jesus said the wrath of God comes from heaven against those whose wickedness suppresses the truth."

I waited about one second for the rector or bishop to say something, if not in Vance's defense, then at least in Jesus's. When neither spoke, I had to. "Actually, Jesus did welcome the outcasts. That's the Good News. Radical love." I paused while her eyes narrowed at me. "I think you may be quoting Paul." Of course, I didn't know which epistle, but that sounded like Paul to me.

"Romans 1:18, I think," said Brady, his eyes avoiding Star's.

Score one for me as Star glared at us all.

"Perhaps in Chicago you have to accept that simplistic view of the Good News. You probably even celebrate it in your politically correct world."

"My world?" I wanted to laugh. "I work in an elementary school."

"Unformed minds," said Brady. "Innocent in appearance, but as totally depraved as are we all."

Okay, that remark actually creeped me out so badly I ignored it.

"It's a Christian elementary school," Claris McGavin said, her first words. I could feel sympathy pouring from her to me.

*Thank you*, I prayed. I'd found my first ally.

"Excellent!" Brady's face spread around his horsey teeth. "I'm sure you do some awesome work to bring young souls to Christ's kingdom."

I nodded, afraid of what might come out my mouth if I opened it. *Awsome*.

Vance snorted to regain our attention. "And Jesus fought back. He was no pussy." He raised a hand toward Kitty. "Sorry. It slipped out."

I didn't want Vance's crudeness to undermine his point. "Jesus did pitch a fit in the temple." Everyone turned to me. Even the bishop, who hadn't reacted to much, glanced my way. "You know, when traditional religion started loving itself more than God or

God's people."

"Middelburg is not a place where liberal fanatics can cause social disruption," said Star.

"You mean, where people can't do what Jesus did?" Vance asked.

I wanted to slap him and tell him to quit baiting her.

Star paused to move a strand of expensively foiled hair behind an ear and to be sure everyone's attention had settled back on her. "Where fanatics devoted to worldliness and political correctness can, indeed, threaten our very survival as a town."

Jack held up a hand. "Star. Please. Let's avoid demonization. It's a tiny place. We're all neighbors."

"I have to question whether or not you're my neighbor," Star said, "if you worship modern ideas such as inclusion over traditional pure Christian beliefs."

*Whoa!* I couldn't wait to get out on that beach and touch that ball. So much easier than small town church.

The bishop slid his hands along the table literally smoothing things out between us. "We certainly support your efforts to sustain a vibrant community. After all, Orion's selection of Middelburg will provide people and energy and money for social improvement."

He had a point. No matter how "family-oriented"—code for conservative—the CEO and his family were, any R and D division would surely bring more progressive thinkers to town, new views with new money. One of the reasons the Belles had scheduled the reunion for this weekend was so we could strategize for the town council meeting next Monday when they discussed funding for a new recreation center. Several of the girls wanted to lobby for indoor soccer space, but that didn't come cheap. These Dutch folks and their money are not soon parted, Marion had told me, especially for something suspiciously like play. A bunch of young innovators would certainly change things up. I wondered if Star had thought about that.

"And we have so much to offer them!" Jack smiled at each person, ponytail swinging. "Our congregation's growing pains

won't matter next to the beauty of the Lake Michigan shore, the blueberry fields, the fishing streams, boating, the charming galleries and restaurants of Holland, Saugatuck, Grand Haven and Muskegon. And Grand Rapids only forty minutes away!"

Everyone chimed in, happy to ease the strain in the room. Everyone except Vance who twirled his knife and Rector Peter McGavin who just stared at his hands. How odd that the man at the core of all this, the one who had driven so many to the breakaway point with his refusal to welcome people with nontraditional lifestyles, had not said a single word during the meeting.

Star glanced at her watch, then picked up her creamy leather binder. "I have an *important* meeting to attend." Beside her, Mimi stood.

*Total toady.*

The bishop stood. "I'll see you out." At his look, I followed his lead. The four of us slid through the heavy wooden door and into the sunny front room, the old wooden floors creaking beneath us.

Star turned. "Bishop Tappen, I rely on you to settle this immediately. Christopher Orion arrives in ten days, and by then Middelburg *will be* without blemish." She shifted her tiny purse and binder. "I know that we may seem a small town for so much attention." She smiled a vinegary smile, and my skin prickled. "However, I can assure you that your efforts are appropriate. My husband and I are well-acquainted across the area with many Episcopal philanthropists." She shrugged. "I can't imagine how disappointed they'd be to hear that this uncontrolled congregation caused such harm to this town. I fear they'd question the value of their giving to your diocese if you have such evident lack of effective leadership."

Holy cow, this lady had balls. I'd never seen anybody, Episcopalian or not, threaten a bishop. But she must have had the kind of power she implied, because he simply nodded.

"That's why I've brought in Reverend Squires," he said. "She's a nationally respected expert on parish reconciliation. She

will solve your problem.”

“Well, I—” I started, but got nowhere.

“If you think that’s best,” Star said, giving me one last glance.

“See you at practice?” I said to Mimi more because I wanted to see her reaction than I wanted to see her at practice.

Her glance slid toward Star. She licked her lips and looked back at me. “I left the Episcopal Church some years ago. I attend Eleventh CLOSER now.”

I thought I saw a hint of a smile on Star’s face.

“Well,” I said, “you were still on the team then. You can come to the reunion.”

“I have other plans,” Mimi said and Star turned. Mimi trailed, their conservatively heeled pumps silent as they crossed and exited the great wooden front porch.

Bishop Tappen smiled at me and it was not a comforting smile, but the kind that made you sorry to stand in your own shoes. Or flip-flops. “Welcome to Middelburg.”

I shook my head. No way was I getting into this mess. “I’m sorry, sir. Without the will to reconcile, and with other clergy and politicians stirring things up even worse, it wouldn’t be appropriate for me to lead you to believe I can help this congregation heal.” I just wanted to go play soccer.

The bishop ran his hands down the front of his shirt. “Really? You come so highly recommended by your faculty mentors. And the people you worked with out East. Should I let them know that you’re contented in the elementary school? That wiping noses fulfills your spirit now?”

I swallowed. “No. I—”

“Is it that you aren’t as dedicated as those people believe?”

I turned to face him. “No. I’m committed to reconciliation in parishes and across the church worldwide. I believe reconciliation is the key to living peacefully in diversity. But people have to want to reconcile.”

“Committed people act on their beliefs, their callings, Reverend Squires. Look at Councilwoman Hannes. Can you say

you live a life as dedicated to your beliefs as she does?”

God, he was right. No matter what I thought of her, she was doing more to honor her beliefs than I was. My stomach felt squeamish again, like when I'd hid in the alley from Jacqueline Booer. What was I doing here? Had God dropped me this opportunity to help me get out of the school? If I walked away, was I turning my back on the very thing I'd asked for?

“Two days after Orion's visit,” the bishop said, “I'm attending a meeting of bishops from across the nation. I'd love to report that you performed a miracle for the Diocese of the Lakeshore. It could help set you up nicely for a new job.” He paused. “Should you desire one, that is.”

National exposure didn't interest me. Jamie had just started her clinic, and we weren't moving. “No, thank you, sir. I want to remain in Chicagoland.”

“Then, St. Gregory's?” he asked. “I understand the open rectorship appeals to you?”

The job I'd applied for. “Yes. But if the congregation isn't willing—”

“I spoke to the head of that search committee,” the bishop said.

*Wait, you did what?* My heart jumped a little. “Oh?”

“It seems that they like you overall, but have some concerns about your abilities to lead a parish. Lack of experience leading adults.”

Now my heart slumped. No wonder they hadn't called.

“I can help with that,” the bishop said. “Imagine, if you put things right here before Orion's visit, what that will prove about your leadership abilities.” He rubbed his hands against his shirt. “And, of course, I have many friends in appropriate places.”

“Sir.” I felt like I'd been beaten in a 6-0 championship. “None of that changes the situation here, which I'm not sure is, at this point, open to reconciliation.”

The bishop nodded. “But what do you have to lose? Failing here won't cost you the St. Gregory's job because you've dropped off their list already.”

*Ouch, ouch, ouch.* My ego bumped and scraped as I considered his words. I didn't like it, but he made sense.

"And I will, of course, match your current weekly salary for the next two weeks. And provide housing."

So, no financial pressure and I could take my only shot at the job in Oak Brook. God sure was making it easy. Maybe he'd set me up to work a miracle.

"Okay, then." I nodded. "I'll do it."

The bishop shook my hand. "It's all yours. If you need me, you can contact the offices in New Era. But don't feel you need to report. Whatever it takes, just do it."

I watched him hop down the porch steps. For the second time in my life, God had used Woman at the Well Episcopal to answer my prayers.

"Okay," I said quietly to the ceiling, "game's on."

## Chapter Six

As I drove out to the beach, I couldn't get the whole church thing out of my mind.

The first time Woman at the Well saved my life, I'd been fourteen and convinced that God—and everyone else—hated me. I grew up thinking God sat in his great stressless recliner in the sky and laughed at us, sort of like my dad laughed at *M\*A\*S\*H* when Hawkeye played a prank on Hot Lips. Or how I giggled at Bugs Bunny tricking Elmer Fudd. We laughed because we loved them.

But the summer before I turned fourteen my endlessly bickering parents dumped me on my Great-aunt Kate for the summer, and I quickly refigured God as a sadist with me as his favorite toy. What else could explain why I got shipped from Winnetka, where I played soccer all day and partied all night, to Middelburg, a place full of Dutch people which had a church I'd never heard of on every corner and a downtown just three blocks

long? Nothing open after five or at all on Sundays. No movie theater. And I had to live with a whacked old lady ordering me around, threatening to send my dog back to my parents if I didn't do exactly what she said, then doing it when I defied her. Even that second summer, when I knew better, she still crabbed, no matter what, that I hadn't done anything right. Sure, Middelburg had dunes and a stretch of sugar sand beach. But no pier. No clubs. In fact, except for one bar where—just like on TV—everyone knew everyone else's names, so there was no chance of sneaking in for an underage beer, the whole town was dry. Not one single store where I could use my fake ID.

The only thing I had going for me was that I didn't have to go to church twice on Sundays and again on Wednesday nights like everyone else in Middelburg. Aunt Kate was Episcopalian.

As I drove through the few blocks of stores and houses that made up Middelburg, a town with a population smaller than my suburban high school, I saw nine other churches and knew there were more, all CLOSER churches. The road ended at the parking lot of a huge beach, and I could see a gaggle of women kicking a ball around in the distance. I parked, took a deep breath and watched the lake to clear my head of the meeting I'd just endured.

"You stay away from church," my Great-aunt Kate said one Sunday morning as she tied her violet straw hat against the offshore breeze. "You wouldn't believe what happens in churches to impressionable kids like you."

"What happens?" I asked, not because I cared, but because it was something to do. I was bored out of my mind and missed my dog. Worst of all, cable TV didn't come out here, so I couldn't even pretend like I was at home just watching my shows. When I wasn't scouring kitchen cupboards or hauling mulch or weeding Aunt Kate's massive perennial beds, I read comics or kicked my soccer ball in the forested dunes around her cottage.

"Don't ask." She picked up the hat-matching basket she used as a purse. "Just because Woman at the Well works for me"—she crooked a bent finger toward her pointy breastbone—"doesn't

mean it's okay for you." She reached up to correct the hat as it tilted over one ear. "Impressionable age you're at, church could damage you forever."

And off she went to Sunday service, leaving me at home with Batman.

The next afternoon, I biked the five miles into town and snuck into the sanctuary of Woman at the Well Episcopal.

Which tells you a little something about me. My aunt understood it before I did. My mother still doesn't get it. Don't ever tell me not to do something and expect me to obey.

Inside the tiny wooden church, shafts of light crisscrossed the dark wooden walls. Air cooled by the interior shadows tickled the sweat on my neck. Wooden beams angled like beech branches overhead. I blinked at the circle of light at one end where, in the center, daylilies and daisies clustered in a brass vase on a long table before a simple cross, made of wood so dark I could hardly distinguish it from the unadorned walls. The dark oak altar rail and choir pews seemed like wise old trees. The pulpit's worn wooden platform topped a column of dingy brass vines and leaves. The lectern, a nearly life-sized brass eagle with spread wings, held a worn reader's Bible, its print giant and clear. The pew backs felt smooth, polished by generations of shoulders in nubby suit coats. It was a perfect escape from the summer heat. I imagined slumping in a cool seat with a comic.

At the tiny entrance to the back of the church, a fluorescent poster announced that the parish needed players for a women's soccer team. I stopped. My toes tingled. I read it three times, then rolled my eyes toward the ceiling. I could almost hear God laughing from his recliner. "Funny," I said, then marched straight up to the second floor offices and announced to the secretary that I wanted to join the church.

And that's another thing about me: once I set my mind to something, I don't quit. That's why I became the top sweeper in the Ladies Lakeshore Christian Soccer League playing for Well's Belles. It's why I was an Olympic-caliber soccer player, but bottomed out during tryouts because of a knee injury. It's

also why, almost a dozen years later to the day, I was ordained as a priest.

I unfolded myself from my car. *Well, you've got your chance*, I told myself. I gathered my gear, tossed my shoes and headed barefoot across the warmish sand. The May breeze off the water bit into my skin, but the sun warmed at the same time. A perfect day.

"Blessed be, it's Rev-Lon!" came a hoot from the end of the group near the goal cones. Marion—all two hundred-plus pounds of her in gray sweats and purple tee draped with a gauzy white cover-up and topped with flaming red hair—barreled toward me.

I braced myself for the hug. I loved Marion. I loved her ex-Catholic, ex-Episcopal, ex-Methodist, church-leaving, Gaia-worship-Buddhist-Native-American-spirituality blend. I hadn't seen her in forever, though we talked on the phone all the time.

"I miss you, Mare," I said as she embraced me, and I suddenly felt much safer than I had in months.

The others, most of whom I hadn't seen in thirteen years, crowded around, joking and hand-slapping.

"You aren't gonna try to clean us up now, are ya, Rev?" asked our keeper, Romee Vrooman.

"Hope not!" Trix Raymer, the right fullback, rolled her eyes. "Get enough of that in town from the CLOSERS." She pronounced it like my aunt had.

"Well, you can't touch this," Marion said, pointing at her chest, and everyone laughed.

I picked up the stuff I'd dropped at her hug. "You still the undercover hell-raiser?"

"And eclectic believer, through and through," she said.

"Please. You're an Episcopalian wannabe if I've ever met one."

"Ha!" She pursed her bright red lips which, no surprise, matched her bright red hair. She'd done that since we were teens. "You go to that meeting at the church?"

Ah, the message I'd left on her phone. "Yep." I dropped my

stuff with everyone else's, and we ran onto the field right in the middle of the play, high-fiving the other Belles as they ran. Colleen, Annika, Romee, Trix, Gaby, all the rest. I was the only one who'd left Middelburg, probably because I was the only one who didn't start here.

"So, was Star Hannes there?" Marion asked as we sidled into our defensive spots near the goal. No one stood in the left wing spot, Mimi Manser's. No doubt she was off trotting around after Star somewhere.

"Yeah. Mimi too." I jogged left as the ball floated that way, but one of the midfielders took control.

"Well, I know what she wants from you. What's the bishop want?" Marion huffed, running near me.

Annika booted the ball back to me to escape Julie, our best winger who was against us in this scrimmage. "Yeah?" The ball felt smooth and controllable as I passed to Marion, who ran it upfield before sending it back to Annika. "What's Star want?"

"To be elected to Congress in the fall." Marion propped her hands on her ample hips as we watched play at the other goal. "So, what's the bishop want?"

I tightened my ponytail, looped it once to make it even shorter. "My expertise in church reconciliation. Wants me to consult."

Marion grabbed my arm, pulling me off balance as I shifted to follow the ball. "Do not get involved with that church." Her nostrils flared like a terrified horse.

"Hey, you can't hold your own player," I said and shook free. I booted the ball back upfield, catching it a little low, and sand flew everywhere. I laughed. "You know, my Aunt Kate told me not to get involved in church. That's why I'm a priest."

Marion waved her sunshine yellow fingernails as if flapping crumbs from a tablecloth. "Never mind about your aunt. I'm serious." She lowered her voice. "Jesus, Mary and Joseph and the great goddess Gaia, Lon. What the hell are you thinking?"

We jogged left again, tracking the ball as the midfielders and forwards struggled to set up a shot. "It's a pretty great chance for

me, Mare. To get out of that school. You know how much I—”

“Yes, I do.” She rounded behind me, anticipating a shot that didn’t come. “You deserve to get out of there too, hon. But not this way. You can’t just walk in and mediate a situation like that one. A lot of people have a lot of reasons to see that church blow apart.”

Julie and Rika, playing forward for the other side, suddenly rushed up with only us between them and the goal. Marion danced in front of Julie, distracting her just enough for me to slide tackle the ball from her feet. Out of bounds. Marion and I dropped back to protect our goal.

“Bishop Tappen told me it was just a misunderstanding blown out of proportion,” I said.

Marion shook her head. “No way, Lon. No. This is civil war. A town tearing itself up, and everyone acting so damned nice and pure all the time.”

“Well, they weren’t too nice in that meeting,” I said, jumping to block the shot with a header. I missed. Romee, the keeper, caught it and sent it flying forward again.

“Hey, Freeman,” Romee yelled. “Quit jabbering at the priest and let her do some praying.”

“That’s playing,” I yelled back.

“Seriously, Lon,” Marion said. “I don’t want to see you hurt. It’s evil stuff going on.”

My stomach jumped. I’d never known Marion to steer me wrong. Still, she could be a little on the dramatic side. I mean, look at that hair. *You can do this*, I told myself. *So it’s a little tougher than they told you. So what? You’re good. You deserve a real challenge. Marion will help.*

“This isn’t just small-town life,” Marion said as we watched the ball. “It’s conservative Dutch small-town life, the center of a tiny denomination fighting for its life, flavored with a big portion of ‘West Michigan nice.’”

“Why do you make niceness sound like the eighth deadly sin?” I pretended to laugh and charged forward to touch a badly passed ball. I passed to Marion to escape their rushing forward,

and she shot it straight up to Annika who, with one smooth move, headed it past their goalie.

“Way to go!” I yelled, high-fiving Marion.

As we moved back into position for the next play, she hung a little too close. “If you don’t get West Michigan nice, you can’t deal with these people, Lon.”

I wasn’t that dumb. “Oh, come on. I lived here for seven summers.”

She shook her head. “Not. The. Same.” She wagged a finger at me. “I love you, Lon, and the reunion will kick ass because you’re here. But then, go home. You want to get a good new job? Working with these people is not the way. It’s poison. Run home.”

As the ball went away from us, I considered her words. I hadn’t figured out how I’d get the time off from school to do what I’d promised Bishop Tappen. I’d have to leave Jamie for at least two weeks. Maybe I should listen, just go back.

But then I saw my ruined sweater in that too-low mirror and heard Larry-Boy the Cucumber chattering away in the back of my mind. I saw myself hiding in an alley and felt the sand smooth and warm between my toes. I glanced at the light sparkling on the water to the south and west, toward Chicago.

*No way.* I simply couldn’t go back to the way it was.

But I wasn’t at all sure I could make this work without Marion.

## Chapter Seven

Not long later we broke for the afternoon. Some ladies had kids to pick up from school, a few had jobs to return to. Marion had to get cleaned up and get back to her restaurant before the early-bird dinner rush.

“I still wish you’d stay with me and Denny and the kids,” she said as we walked across the beach toward our cars. The afternoon light bounced bright yellow flashes off the water, the cars, and everyone else’s blond hair.

The Silver Skates Hotel, I assured her, would be fine. I had a lot to think about.

“Well, come by The Grind for dinner,” Marion said. “And breakfast tomorrow. Maybe everyone’ll come for lunch. I got a buttermilk ‘pop’ that will knock your socks off.”

Buttermilk pop. Dutch food of some kind and probably not really carbonated buttermilk, but probably not much better. *No thanks*. I just nodded.

“Look, Mare, this thing at the church.” We stopped next to her burgundy minivan, unmistakable because of the Steve Yzerman bobblehead collection on the dash. “It’s got to work. And you’ve convinced me, I need your help.”

She beeped her door open. “Un-unh.” She tossed her stuff in then plopped into the seat before reaching out to touch my arm. “I’m not kidding, Lon. Tell the Bishop no. Something came up. Make do at that school a little longer.”

I wanted to tell her about hiding in the alley from an enraged mom, about kicking the crap out of my old ball and old brick walls. I wanted to tell her I had had enough of doing nothing and waiting.

Maybe she saw all of it coming because she gave me a squeeze. “No matter what. Your life can’t be that bad. Don’t do this.”

Maybe it was the soccer rush stoking my brain and blood, or maybe it was Marion’s unspoken assumption that working at an Episcopal school was all peaches and cream, but suddenly, I knew I was done making do. And, like I’ve said before, don’t tell me not to do something and expect me to obey. I kissed Marion and watched her head back to her diner, then sat in my car in the warm May sun and called my bishop back home.

Actually it went more easily than I could have hoped. My bishop, Max Beshara, knew Bishop Tappen and had heard about the troubles at Woman at the Well. He loved me and wanted me in his diocese and told me that he’d truly been sorry when the St. Greg’s group had put my résumé aside for lack of experience.

“If you can help this church and secure a strong recommendation from Bishop Tappen,” Max said. “I’m sure I could convince the committee at St. Gregory’s to reconsider your application. Their next committee meeting is in two weeks.”

“Plenty of time,” I said, still flush with the confidence of stealing three during the scrimmage.

He laughed full and hearty. “Love your spirit, Lon. But look. This leaves me, us, with a situation. I got a call from another parish late yesterday and they want to hire your Sheila to direct their church day-care center.”

*Oh, no.* I couldn't stand to lose Sheila from the school. She was the only sane head in our pre-school program. I'd die without her there.

"The job's not as nice as yours," Max continued, "doesn't pay as well, and she'd have to commute a good deal farther. But they need a decision from her, well, before...and if you're leaving I'd like to offer her..." He let me put the rest together.

"I can do this," I said.

"If you do, I'll back you. The committee's floundering and they loved you."

"Except for my lack of experience."

"Well, yes. But this will change everything. If it goes well."

Two bishops supporting me would ensure I got a rectorship of my own at a local congregation. I had a few vacation days coming, and with the stipend Woman at the Well would pay me, Jamie wouldn't need to know I'd resigned until I told her I had the job at St. Greg's. She might find out, of course. And she'd be furious. But I was so close to getting out of the school, to getting the work I craved. And it would bring more money, a more flexible schedule. Jamie's life would be better too. And I wouldn't have to spend another year dreaming about *Veggie Tales* or lusting after nice outfits. I'd sooner eat buttermilk pop three times a day.

"I resign," I said and fear licked my heart. But then I felt the urge to stretch and yawn and run.

I was free.

Later, after I drove back east of town toward the highway and checked into the Silver Skates, I called Jamie's cell. Surprise—she picked up.

"Hey, babe," Jamie said. "I'm having a long lunch with Cheri Ricci. Remember her?"

"Malpractice attorney, right?" But I was faking it, I remembered her perfectly. We'd met at the party when the clinic had opened. A lanky raven-haired woman—like me—who made a professional blouse and slacks look like runway garb at a lingerie show—not like me. A head always tilted ever so slightly toward

Jamie. A hand that just happened to brush Jamie's thigh every now and then. And one of the best attorneys in Chicagoland. I hated her.

"In fact," Jamie continued, "you'll be happy about this. When you're out of town this weekend, we're going to pull a few marathon meetings. Hack through a bunch of new paperwork. Then I'll be freed up next week to spend some evenings with you when you get home. I miss you."

"I miss you too." She'd worked so many long days, nights, weekends, many of them with this attorney. I didn't like the idea of them in a marathon anything when I wasn't there. And I hated that she could find time for me now, when I wasn't home. When I had to tell her no.

If I'd had a soccer ball I would have kicked it through a wall. Instead, I flopped backward onto the spongy delft blue bedspread and stared at a fading framed print of a windmill among tulips.

"Isn't that great?" Jamie asked.

Maybe this whole thing wasn't such a good idea after all. I tried not to imagine Cheri Ricci in my house. Sitting on my couch. Laughing in my kitchen.

"Babe?"

For a moment I had the urge to tell her everything. How miserable I'd been. How my sweater had been ruined and how these people here needed me and how much I wanted her to be happy and how she'd be happier if I were happier and then things would be better all around.

"Babe?" she asked again. "You called. You want something?"

"You," I said.

She laughed and I imagined her tossing her head back, her highlighted hair flashing in the sun. "Next week, babe. Four free evenings, all for you."

"You could come here this weekend," I said before I even thought about it. "Hang out on the beach, take some real down time. Work with Cheri in smaller chunks next week."

She laughed again. "I love the idea, really, I do, but we've worked this out. You'll get plenty of time and attention next

week, promise. Be patient.”

“Well, actually,” I began and told her all about Woman at the Well. Everything except about resigning from the primary school. I knew not to push it. This way, she listened and I felt brave.

“Wow,” she said. “Pretty cool. It makes sense for you, for the St. Greg’s job.”

This was going well.

“You are so great,” Jamie said. “You work so hard for us. You know, Cheri was just telling me about another doctor client she has whose wife just showed up at home one afternoon and announced she’d quit her job. No notice or anything. Just decided she’d had it and walked out.”

I rolled over onto my face, not so brave. “Oh?”

“Said she’d gotten sick of working crap jobs to put him through med school and residency and a new practice. Said the guy didn’t know what to do.”

“Oh?” *This is not funny, God*, I thought as a lead weight formed in my gut.

“So I said he ought to divorce her ass,” Jamie said.

That lead weight started using my stomach as a trampoline. I pressed my hand over my belly button.

“I mean,” she said, “that’s not how relationships work. And if you can’t trust her to hold up her end of the bargain, or at least make decisions with you, how can you trust her at all?” Jamie paused. “I’m lucky I have you, Lon. You’re so dependable.”

*Oh, shit. Shit, shit, shit.*

“Lon?”

“Yes?” Swallow.

“Maybe tonight, if you call me late, we can talk, huh?” Her voice was low and throaty, and I knew what she wanted. She had a rich sensual imagination. It made me tingle.

*Oh, but when you find out what I’ve done, you won’t want me. My foot jiggled against the bed. Oh man, what have I done?*

## Chapter Eight

“You can tell me which clothes,” Jamie said.

“Huh?” I was lost in visions of intimacy and the dissolution of my home life.

“Clothes. If you’re staying there two weeks or so, you need some professional outfits. Tonight when we talk, you tell me what you want and I’ll overnight it out to you. And no matter what you say, I’ll be nice, I promise. Even if you get all whiny about the elementary school.”

I sat up. “Whiny?” Cheerio vomit and bitchy mothers and laundered poodles and drippy kids and my ruined sweater all crashed in on me. “Whiny?”

“Oh, Lon, don’t go ballistic on me now. Sorry I mentioned it.”

“Ballistic?” My mind spun ahead, vaulting over things I might possibly say, looking for something true and safe about what I’d done and why. “By staying here, I’m using my vacation time,” I

said, “and collecting a few thousand dollars as well.”

Jamie was glad to change the subject and talk about money. “Lon, you’re wonderful. That’ll help so much. I’ve got to hire this plant service to keep things green and fresh in the office and you would not believe what that costs a month. It’ll look so wonderful, because of you!” She smooched loud and clear over the phone. A weasel of guilt circled and settled beneath my ribs.

“Jamie.” I hated that she thought the other doctor ought to divorce his wife because she had quit her job. “Maybe that other woman, maybe she’d have lost herself if she stayed on her job one more day.”

“Well, she lost her husband instead.” She laughed. “They’re probably both better off.”

Ugh. “So, you think I can do this right?” *Because I already quit. Oh, Lord, what have I done?*

“You’ll be fine,” she said. “You thrive under pressure, and you know if you screw this up, you’ll be even worse off, because you’ll be locked into that school for life. Having no leadership record is way worse than being a proven failure.” She paused. “How’s that for pressure?”

She had no idea. My stomach lurched.

After we hung up, I stared at the watercolor windmill. A lot could happen in two weeks. Oak trees went from bare branches to full leaves. Seeds changed to flowers. I could become what the St. Gregory’s committee needed to hire me. And Jamie would never need to know I’d quit my job before I secured a new one.

I nodded to my reflection in the framed glass. I could pull this off. I’d make everything better for both of us. Just like sweeping both sides of the field, no matter what. Keep the ball away from the goalie and get it downfield. The buck stops here. I could do it.

Of course, I knew how to stop an offense on a field. I didn’t know how to navigate the world of Middelburg, Michigan. *Help, help, help*, I prayed as I rose and wandered toward the mirror. I rubbed my face. This is not where I expected to be when I got out of bed this morning.

Then the answer charged across my brain like a sweeper running down a forward on a breakaway. *I need Marion.*

And I knew where to find her. The Windmill Grind Kaffe Klatsch and All Dutch All The Time Café. Home of buttermilk pop.

From the hotel I drove the four miles back into town, through dirt fields where corn would eventually grow, past rows and rows of spidery blueberry bushes. As I got closer to town, I passed the hulking Marine Light Company, evidently derelict, some of its windows shattered, grass tufting in cracks in the old parking lot, pieces of old boats stacked on rotting palettes. I wondered when that had gone out of business and who was going to clean it up before CEO Orion's visit next week. The next block held small shops—a woodworker, plumber, electrician, satellite TV guy and Bionic Buys Used Cars. I drove through the civic block with the town hall and the police station and the library on one side and the giant park on the left, all lined with bountiful pink redbud trees and beds of tulips of every color and stripe. The somber twin churches on the north and south corners of Main and Matthew streets—First and Second CLOSER—started the single block of “downtown” Middelburg.

It looked mostly the same. Skinny's B-B-Cue bar, Maarten's Apothecary and Supplies, Salted Herring Homemade Candies. But Aunt Kate's favorite ice cream shop at the end of the street right near the beach had been replaced by a sunny little coffee shop called Breezin' Brew with sailboats painted in the window, and there were three empty storefronts: Woolworth's gone, a local shoe store vanished, a tiny restaurant called the Pot and Kettle, which had produced the best hot fudge doughnut sundaes I'd ever had, nowhere. Still, the gardens sported straight edges and weedless beds and the trashcans looked to have been spit-polished. Neat and clean, like a man who'd just gotten a short, precise haircut.

I parked as close as I could to The Grind, which was across from Second CLOSER, and navigated the uneven cracked concrete sidewalks. Marion did a good business. Woman at the

Well stood almost two blocks away, at the far corner of the green and blooming Central Park, tucked in among the houses. It would be a nice walk from there to Marion's in the coming days, when I was working long hours and needed a break. Assuming Marion didn't go into a snit when I told her I'd ignored her advice and taken this job.

The entrance to The Windmill Grind shone with a fresh coat of bright blue paint. "All Dutch All The Time!" proclaimed one window in delft-blue neon script. "Smakelijk good!" proclaimed the other window in fluorescent red. Pronounced "smack-lick" I knew because Marion said it when she answered The Grind's phone. In Dutch, it meant tasty.

Marion was only half Dutch, but she'd married Dutch, and that just passed muster in Middelburg. The Grind was already an institution when Marion took it over a decade or so ago. She'd have lost the business by changing anything, and she knew it. New coats of paint, but never a different color.

With the theme song from *Cheers* running through my head, I pushed through the café door and a bell jingled loudly.

What happened next reminded me of a dairy barn I'd visited with my aunt. When the farmer led us through a door at one end of the enormous barn, all the Holsteins, lined up on either side in stalls ready for milking, had turned their square black-and-white heads in cud-chewing unison to check us out. Not hostile, just curious. That's just what these square-jawed, early-bird-dinner-munching Dutch folks looked like as they swiveled to see who had entered.

I wanted to turn and run, but I just smiled. Behind the counter, Marion chattered to an older crew cut man in a blue work shirt, poured coffee for a long, tall, hollow-eyed guy, and refilled a bowl with chilled butter slices. She wore jeans, a yellow chambray big shirt and a bright white chef's apron. Smiling sun earrings dangled nearly to her shoulders beneath short hair, gelled into a chic bright red mess. Her yellow nails flashed as she moved.

I slid onto the only free counter stool and leaned toward her.

“How come you aren’t flipping grilled cheese with your feet?”

Marion didn’t look up. “Not in an all-Dutch café.” She turned away from me to replace the coffee on a burner. “Unless it was Gouda.” She turned to me, her grin wide. “As you well know, Lonnie Squires. Bless my soul, I can’t get over how good it is to see you.” She reached across the counter, knocking over a sugar container, and hugged me. Then in a flash of sponge, she cleaned up her mess. “Too bad you’re going home so soon.” She gave me a raised eyebrow that reminded me of Mr. Spock and Elvira Gulch.

Before I could answer, she shouted, “Dinner!” her finger pointed in the eureka pose. Then she bustled away.

“You Kate Squires’s niece?” said the guy with the crew cut. He was maybe seventy, gray stubble on his head and his chin.

I nodded.

He nodded back, his John Deere hat bobbing solemnly. “Scored three goals in five minutes in the church league championship in nineteen ninety-three.” He chewed what could have been tobacco, since I hadn’t seen him take a bite, working his mouth sideways and back. “Amazing thing.” Chew. “Amazing.”

Then crew cut whispered to long and hollow on the other side of him, who leaned forward to get a good look at me. I smiled and he turned away to talk to the guy on the other side of him. Then crew cut got up to go have a chat with a bunch of white-haired guys tucked into a corner booth.

“Drink this.” Marion put a thick white mug of oily black coffee in front of me. It didn’t look like something that would sit too well on my stomach. “Tell me everything about your life and why in heaven’s name you don’t call me more!”

I told Marion about the Little Lambs Toddler Room and the blot on my shirt and my need to quit and what Jamie had said about the doctor divorcing his wife.

Marion glided around the bar to the stool that crew cut had vacated. She handed me a small pitcher of cream. “About the shirt. Can you sell it on eBay? ’Cause some woman here in town sold some old Dutch Bible on eBay last month for about a zillion

dollars.”

“Really?” Christine had said the same thing. I needed a lot less than a zillion to solve my problems and I sure had a few extra copies of the good book lying around.

“Really! Well, maybe not a zillion, but I know she got her house reroofed and new vinyl siding put on because Colleen Brink told me. She jogs by there every day, except Tuesdays, when she’s room mother in D.J.’s second-grade class, but she talked to the woman and—” Marion paused. “You know? She never told me who that woman was. I gotta ask her about that. Anyhow. So you need a new job. Must be lots of churches need a priest.”

“Woman at the Well does.” I waited for the explosion.

“Oh, don’t wince at me,” Marion said. “I already know. The Bishop called McGavins and told them to find you a place to stay, and Claris was in here not five minutes ago picking up some nice krakelingen to make it seem more homey. You’ll be staying at the Van Hoorn’s cottage north of town. They’re on an RV trip until September.”

My mind boggled. “No secrets in a small town, huh?”

Marion looked even more serious. “Not small ones. But lots of big ones. A small town’s the best place to keep big secrets. The kind people want kept. Unless you’re leading a church. Pastors are fair game.” She rested a hand on mine. “That’s why you can’t take this church thing. It’s all tangled up somehow in Star’s extreme town makeover and Ace Reporter Vance’s tell-all tabloid town history project. Plus, an athletic legend turned woman priest? You’ll be like Brittany Spears come to town. Everyone will watch your every move. And you don’t want that, do you?”

Considering I was so deeply in the closet that I’d never even told Marion the truth about my relationship with my “roommate,” no, I didn’t. Not every place in my church was open to gay priests, and until I got a job, I didn’t want anything like that grabbing public attention.

## Chapter Nine

Even though Marion had unnerved me, I laughed. “You’re joking.”

“Not. Remember the priests you used to tell me about, screaming at each other over the translation of a single word in a Biblical verse? Well, around here neighbors come to blows about someone trimming a hedge on Sunday. And everyone knows every pastor’s business. We all lose perspective inside our own little worlds. Middelburg is a very little world, and ministers are its stars.”

I sipped the coffee and found it surprisingly smooth. “Still, life in Middelburg must be pretty slow if an over-the-hill soccer-playing priest gets that kind of attention.”

A small group of well-dressed men walked in, looking for a hostess. “You need to go?” I asked.

Marion nodded. “Gotta get Kaylee off her break. My new manager, and good, but smoking all the time. I told Cam and

Mitch I'd wring their necks if I ever caught them smokin', even if they were forty-two."

I eyed the oil slick on top of my coffee for the two minutes it took Marion to return with a tall, high-cheek-boned blond girl with the totally hip potbelly tastefully covered by a too-big Windmill Grind T-shirt, in delft blue. "Hey," she said to me as she grabbed a pen and guided the three men toward a booth.

"I ordered you Lof met Ham en Kaas. With mashed potatoes," said Marion.

Sounded heavy enough to sink me if I tried to swim. Good thing the lake was still like ice. "Not buttermilk pop?"

"Nonsense. Tomorrow for lunch, maybe. But not your first dinner here! Dat Lof is smack-lick." She made a kissing sound. "Perfection." She leaned forward to whisper. "Now, at my house, it's different. Come Sunday night. Big fat cheeseburgers and a nice merlot. A little incense in the background." She squeezed my arm. "I'm so glad you came this weekend, Lon."

"I'm staying, Marion."

She heaved a bosom-shaking sigh. "You always were a stubborn and contrary ass."

We laughed. "Yeah, but who saved whose butt when she drove herself out to the Hornet Lounge in Borculo to play pool and smoke Swisher Sweets and got caught by her daddy, Miss No-Smoking-Or-I'll-Kill-You?"

Marion hooted. "I still owe you for savin' my skin that time."

"You do. I'm collecting now."

Marion chewed her lips. "Mmm, mmm, mm."

"Please. I need you to make this work. It'll be like the old days on the soccer field. No matter what crazy play I tried to make, you'd back me up. We were unbeatable."

She couldn't stop the grin from tugging at the corners of her mouth. "Well..."

"You mentioned 'West Michigan nice' earlier? What did you mean?"

I heard the front doorbell ring again behind me and saw

Marion glance toward it. She looked at me and took a quick breath.

“Too much to explain now,” she said. “But remember this, until you get to know someone, don’t assume that anything nice they say is true. Not anything, you got it? They’ll be all nice, and you’ll start to feel all secure and then you’ll take your shot too early. And they’ll stop it and turn it back, run the distance and score for themselves and make you look like an ass.”

“Got it.” I loved it when she talked in soccer analogies.

“Second,” she said, glancing up again, “the best thing about dealing with Vance TerMolen is that he is never West Michigan nice. He’s still a slug.”

I smiled. “A dope.”

“But what he says is usually the truth. It’s his game to keep control.”

“He’s after Star Hannes. Why?”

Marion nodded. “He’s hated her guts since high school. Some prank at the senior prom that he’s never gotten over. I don’t even remember. But it’s a life feud, that’s for sure. He’d love to crush her little political career and most everyone in town knows it. It’s like having your own reality TV show live, right in front of you, those two.”

She glanced up again. “Crap. Lon, look, the other thing about Vance, he shows up when you least expect it and won’t let you alone.” She leaned forward and whispered. “Don’t be nice to him or you will never get rid of him. Just like summer.”

I remembered. I remembered how he’d tried to kiss me once, at the beach, my last summer before college. He’d grabbed my wrist, told me he loved me, that he knew, just knew I cared for him too. When I’d told him I was flattered, but no thanks, I wasn’t interested, he hadn’t let go. I asked him to let go, but he gripped harder, holding me against the clump of dune grass where we’d settled after the group’s midnight swim. The others were all around us, so I wasn’t really scared. But still, he wouldn’t let go.

I watched Marion watch someone come up behind me and

sensed the body there just before long fingers circled my wrist. "All caught up, ladies? The Reverend and I got work to do."

I jerked away. "Vance TerMolen."

He grinned, his eyes crinkling under his shaggy dark bangs. I realized with a shock that if he just cleaned up, he could've been hot. Still, I wanted to tell him to never touch me again or I'd kick him in the groin so hard he wouldn't walk straight for a month. But Vance would be key to my getting my job done, so I decided to play nice, despite Marion's warning.

"You want something to eat?" I asked.

He nodded. "I'll take her seat first"—he nudged Marion—"then whatever you're having."

Marion cast me a be-careful glance and swung her hips into the kitchen.

Vance slid his skinny, black jean-clad butt onto the stool then pulled his knife from a pocket and began to rotate it in his hand. "Mind if I sip your coffee?" He reached a hand toward my cup, and I snatched it away.

*Gross.* Vance had stayed the same beanpole he'd been in adolescence. His hair still needed to be cut, his face needed to be shaved and he needed to wear better clothes.

He pulled a pack of cigarettes out of his black T-shirt pocket.

"Stop." I tilted my knife in his direction. "Please." I smiled.

He stared straight at me and pulled a cigarette from the pack.

"Stop." I grabbed the nearest fork and raised it to my shoulder, ready to hurl it at the cigarette poised in his hand. "Or I'll kill you before the cigarettes do."

## Chapter Ten

“Kill me?” Vance laughed and tapped the cig against the cup that held packets of generic creamer between plastic catsup and mustard squirters. “Like that’s gonna happen, priest.”

“Do not smoke at my corner of the counter.” My right foot jiggled, trying to shake off the energy crawling through me like ants.

The Dope twisted his nose and tapped the cigarette back into its squashed package. “You’re the reverend, Reverend. Glad to see the holiness hasn’t dulled your edge.” He pulled something from his back pocket, the silver zippers in his black leather jacket glinting in the light.

“Oh, drop dead.”

He set a tiny digital recording device on the counter between us. A bright red dot indicated it was running.

“So, word has it you’ve returned after a many-year absence to reconcile the good people of Woman at the Well church,” Vance

said. "You wanna comment on that for the *Middelburg Record*?"

I took a big sip of coffee.

"What makes you think we good people want to be reconciled, Reverend Squires?"

I deliberately folded my napkin. Just as slowly, I picked up the recorder and pushed the power off. Then I slid it back to him. "Tomorrow is my first day working with this congregation. I'd prefer not to comment at this time."

He watched me with those too-wide eyes, then slid the recorder back into his pocket. "Star Hannes intends to run for a congressional seat in the next election. She's wooing Orion GameTech's CEO so he relocates here. It'll supercharge the local economy and boost her standing with voters."

He paused when Marion arrived with two plates of what looked like ham wrapped around lettuce with cheese over the top. I bent to smell it—definitely sprinkled with nutmeg.

"Fresh endive," Marion said, then spun away.

"It's like you said in the meeting," Vance continued. "She could focus on the good things: the twenty-six churches, the Interfaith Project House, the downtown facelift, low house costs. But she's picking on us like a kid with a zit. And I won't let her political ambitions stop us from starting a new congregation."

"Why are you so sure that's the only way?" I asked.

"Bunch of bigots," Vance said. He rotated that red knife, tapping it against the counter. "Isabelle says the hatred is affecting her kids. People are leaving, driving to Grand Rapids or Holland or Grand Haven for a decent church."

"Sounds rough," I said, tasting the odd ham thing. It was strange, but fabulous. "What about Rector McGavin?"

"His close-mindedness makes me want to puke," said Vance. Tap. Rotate. Tap. "He must not have had a say in you showing up, though. He hates women priests as much as he hates gays and Muslims."

Nice. Still, I wouldn't let Vance bait me. "I'll look forward to a warm welcome."

"That's why we're splitting," Vance said. "So you, so anyone

who comes to this town can find a warm welcome in a church. A place where welcome doesn't just mean 'do it our way or get lost.'" Tap. Tap.

"Vance TerMolen, Middelburg's ambassador of the Good News?"

He blinked at me. "Of the Good Fight, more likely. I hate bigots." He shrugged, stared at his knife. "And I kinda like church. Like old Father Johnson did it. Not this guy."

Edward Johnson had been the rector when we were kids. He'd retired some time after Aunt Kate died.

"I want that church back. Everyone can come and be okay there." Vance leaned forward, pushing his untouched plate aside. "You know McGavin wants our congregation to leave the Episcopal Church, because of that gay bishop. He wants to work with some bishop in Uganda."

"Sadly, he's not the only one," I said.

"Until I pointed out in an editorial in the paper that he would be throwing his support behind a bishop that welcomed polygamists." Vance grinned. "That put a wrench in the works."

I had to smile. Another nice move by the Dope.

"But our parish will stay in the Episcopal Church of the USA. And if they'd just leave us alone, the insanity would stop."

Rotate. Tap.

Tap.

Tap.

I chewed, waiting.

"And if they don't, I'm going to print everything I've found."

"Which is?"

"Secrets no one wants out." He pushed his dinner around with a fork. "If you treat me nice, I might share what I know," he said. "And I know lots about Middelburg. The truth about the place. The truth about its people. I've been digging for months. A civic project, sort of."

He rotated the knife, tapped it again. Rotate, tap. Rotate, tap.

I'd have reached out to stop him, but I didn't want to touch him. I wanted to tell him to kiss off. But I was going to need him on good terms to untangle the church mess.

"I'm very interested in hearing what you've discovered," I said. "You'll be one of the many people I talk to. At church."

He nodded. Rotate, tap. Rotate, tap. "You always did miss a good thing when it was right in front of you," he said. He pulled a plastic white toothpick from the knife and began to suck on it, twitching his nose and mouth. "You ever tell anybody the truth about yourself?"

The energy on my skin shifted, buzzing again. I stabbed another bite of ham in lettuce and willed my hand to hold it steady. "All the time."

He leaned forward, fingering the knife. "Really?" His half smile made it clear it wasn't a question, but an expression of disbelief.

Fear zipped across my scalp. He'd been investigating Middelburg citizens. Had he been digging things up about me? About Jamie?

"Why wouldn't you sleep with me?"

I laughed with relief. "Still hung up on some failed sexual conquest from fifteen years ago? Get a life."

Vance grinned. "Judging by the look on your face a minute ago, there's something you're hiding. There always is." He tapped the knife twice. "But you know that, from confessions, right?"

I looked at my half-eaten plate. "Can we continue this talk in an official way? At the church? I haven't even spoken to the rector yet."

"He won't tell you anything." The Dope leaned sideways, draping an arm over the counter. "You know you're the only girl at the summer bonfires who wouldn't sleep with me."

I knew he hadn't slept with Marion. Or Colleen. "Like I said before, Vance, drop dead."

"Guess that makes you part of local history too. You and that crazy aunt of yours."

"You didn't!"

He shook his head. "She was quite a fixture. Cuckoo Kate, we called her."

I could imagine. Still, she was my aunt. "Hey. Kate's dead. Leave her alone." I smiled and flipped my hair behind my shoulder. "Or else."

He laughed. "You'd have been glad enough to have someone nail her when you were a kid. But I guess things change. Well"—he slid from the stool—"gotta get home and let my puppy out." He smiled at my raised eyebrows. "Yes, even I, slimy old Vance, like dogs, Reverend."

I heard something there other than sarcasm, but I couldn't tell if it was anger. Or pain. I sighed.

"I got it all," he said. "About the people who live here now, about the people who used to live here, about the history of the place. The church. Generations back." He pulled his bangs from his eyes. "Stuff people would pay to keep quiet, but I'm not after the money."

I set down my knife and fork. "What are you after, Vance?"

"Believe it or not, Lonnie, peace."

"Then I expect we can help each other. How about you call me at church and get on my calendar?"

"I'd like to get on more of yours than that." He bent until we were face to face and he sighed hot breath on my cheek. He shook his head. "Never married. Such a waste."

So he had checked my background. I shivered and looked into the too-wide pools of ebony watering close to mine. "Vance, drop—"

He raised a finger to stop me. "I know what to do."

I cleaned my plate, hungrier than I had realized, and even sucked down the huge slice of limburgse möffelkook which Marion plopped in front of me, a golden cake bursting with raisins and currants and frosted with just plain old sugar.

Maybe the weirdness with Vance had adrenalized me, because all that food didn't even slow me down on the practice field that night. We went out for a few drinks, laughed until our stomachs hurt, and everyone headed home. Back at the Silver Skates,

messages informed me that Claris McGavin had indeed secured a cottage for me and would leave the key under the doormat, and Jamie promised my “priest clothes” would arrive tomorrow, special delivery.

And Vance had called, offering to come keep me company through the night. “My bedroom chat would interest you,” he said. “Give me a chance.”

*Ick.* I erased his message, took the phone off the hook and went to bed.

## Chapter Eleven

Saturday morning, I met the Belles at Marion's at nine for a homemade Wentelteefje brunch, with extra icing and cinnamon. Wentelteefjes are waffley sorts of things and really, really good. The Dope called my cell phone twice before I even left the hotel, explaining the church gave him the number. Great. I'd have to talk to Claris about keeping that a little more private. I told Vance to call me at the church on Monday, so when he called back, I ignored him. During brunch, my phone vibrated against my leg over and over. I looked, hoping for Jamie, but saw Vance's cell number instead. I ignored it.

From there, stoked on sugar, we Belles headed to the sorry grassy space that passed as the municipal soccer field and practiced. I could see why they were so desperate to rally at the town council meeting Monday night and support the new recreation center. It struck me that Star Hannes would be strongly in support of that since new athletic facilities would surely impress the family-

minded CEO of Orion GameTech.

When practice ended at noon, I went back to the hotel to shower and check out. My cell showed five missed calls, all from Vance. Not one from Jamie. I wondered if she was too busy with Cheri Ricci to call.

In the shower I decided I'd have to confront her about the hours she'd been "working," find out if something other than the clinic was keeping her so busy. It made my stomach goofy just thinking about it, so I stood in the hot water a long time, hoping to steam the murky feeling out of my pores. It didn't, but I got out anyhow so I didn't turn into a Dutch raisin. I'd just changed into fresh khaki shorts and a black polo and was toweling my hair when someone knocked at my room door.

Vance knew where I was staying, of course, so I tiptoed to the peephole just as a woman outside called, "Room service. Special delivery."

I knew the voice. "Jamie!" I yanked the door open, and my beloved swung in carrying a small suitcase and several hangers full of my clergy clothes. She tossed it all over the chair and threw her arms wide. "Special delivery!"

She explained in a rush that she'd put off the attorney until late next week and had worked things so she could stay a few days to relax and get away from it all.

I felt guilty about my worries and so very glad to see her. I wanted to talk, but she had other things in mind and, as usual, I let her persuade me. Needless to say, an hour later I had to take another shower, checked out late and the maid had to remake the bed. But, oh well. I left an extra tip.

About three we drove to the cottage that the church had lined up for me. Seven miles north of town it sat alone, a dense hardwood forest on the north, east and west and blueberry fields across the street to the south, the tiny four-room place was clean, cool and perfect. Not another house in sight. Inside, we found Marion's homemade cookies and a second key with a note from Claris McGavin explaining it would let me into the church, the parish house and the spare office, which she'd already fixed up

for me. Claris, Dutch efficiency incarnated.

The Belles game against the champion of the local church league, the Thirteenth Church Canons, started at seven, but by four I'd gotten pretty antsy, dancing on one foot, then the other. I dressed in purple shorts and my old yellow uniform top and gazed out the front window at the blue spruce and red pines in the front yard and at the blueberries across the street. The new green leaves almost glowed in the spring light.

"Just go," said Jamie, looking up from the magazine she was curled with into a chair. "I'll explore this evening and see you back here later."

She never came to a game or went out with the team after, but she never begrudged me my time out either. We kissed and I felt better than I had in weeks when I jumped in the car and decided instead of going early to the field and looking like an impossible soccer nerd, I'd drive in to the church. I had a bad case of "what the hell have I done" jitters, and the church would be quiet. I'd just spend a little time getting a feel for things.

I drove south on Haven Ave until I hit 187th and turned west. About two miles in, not quite to town, I passed the enormous red brick church with dark metal roof, surrounded by ball fields, macadam fields for parking, basketball courts and a huge red neon marquee. Frontline Church of Christ. Brady Wesselynk's domain. "Get it right or you'll get left," the sign proclaimed, before scrolling to this weekend's concert times. Yikes.

More blueberry fields, which ended abruptly as I crossed John Street and suddenly entered a block of turn of the century houses. After a while, I made a few turns and pulled up in front of the parish house just south of Central Park. The towering Victorian had a porch with two wicker rockers and a two-story turret that leaned slightly to the right, toward the church. I let myself in, stepping directly into what had once been the sitting room, now Claris's office. A set of tall doors to the left protected the rector's office. Farther back I could see a smaller meeting room and the parish library.

Claris's note had indicated my office was upstairs and "toward

the back,” so I climbed the central staircase. The second floor mirrored the first in front, with another meeting room and a nursery. I passed a small bathroom, and finally, at the end of a narrow hall found a dark wooden door with a neatly printed three-by-five card that said “Reverend L. Squires” taped over the regular sign. I lifted the card and peeked. The sign normally read “Storage.” *Just great.*

It could only be described as a garret room with a low sloped ceiling and two dormer windows. Boxes of stuff had been stacked neatly against all the walls and when I looked more closely, I say they’d been dusted. Claris, Dutch efficiency and Dutch clean. God bless her.

A tiny desk held an old computer and a heavy metal desk lamp. A side table and two ancient office chairs filled the rest of the space so two people could barely sit without touching knees.

I settled into the worn orange chair, its fabric so rough I wondered if I’d have rug burns on the backs of my thighs. Now that I had nice clothes, I’d come to church tomorrow morning, see for myself what these folks had gotten so upset about. I wondered if I should call the breakaway leaders, ask them to come too, so we could all talk about it later. Plus, I wanted to tell Vance TerMolen to go jump in the cold, cold lake and quit leaving me messages.

I tried his cell first. No answer, so I left a message. “It’s Lonnie Squires. I’d like to meet after church tomorrow if Jack and Isabella can come. As for your calls, Vance, I can only say one thing: death.”

I’d just finished leaving a similar message on Vance’s home machine and was about to head downstairs to look for a parish phonebook when a door somewhere below shut with an angry bang.

## Chapter Twelve

I clicked my phone shut. I should've locked the door behind me.

*Oh, relax. This is Middelburg. There is no violent crime here. Star Hannes won't allow it.*

I walked quietly down the hall toward the stairs, clicking my office door shut. Everything quiet, nothing out of place back here. If anyone else had come in, he had to be on the floor below. I tiptoed down, a precaution made ridiculous by the creaking floorboards. But a quick look in each of the open rooms showed nobody. Still, I was sure I'd heard it.

Then I heard it again, a door slam, only this time, next door at the church. I laughed at my own nerves. Probably the rector or the sexton or a member of the altar guild getting ready for tomorrow. In fact, I thought, pocketing my key and leaving the other phone calls for later, I'd drop on over and introduce myself.

The church's four wooden stairs creaked as I climbed them, and the heavy dark red door moaned as I opened it. The tiny entry held a bulletin board, an offering box and maybe enough room for four people before someone would have to push through the next set of swing doors. Everything—floor, ceiling and walls—was made of the same dark wood.

Then I heard it. One male voice, a tenor, belting out a show tune from *Les Miserables*.

I pushed my way in as the voice echoed off the bare wooden walls. The sanctuary, so tiny it might hold 150 people packed in tight, had only one soft spotlight glowing on the pulpit at the front. I saw no one, though the door to the sacristy behind the altar was ajar.

"Hello?" I asked quietly.

No reply, but then I saw him, bent to rub a white cloth over the dark pew in front of the pulpit.

He kept singing, about beating hearts and drums and the coming of a better tomorrow. He had earbuds plugged into an MP3 player tucked into the back pocket of his considerably worn jeans. Lean arms with rippling muscles worked back and forth from the cut-off sleeves of an old white T-shirt. His dark, thin hair swung with his movements, shadowing his eyes. He hadn't shaved in days. On a college campus, perfectly normal. Oiling the pews, just a delight.

I laughed.

When he bellowed the final words, he stretched himself up and waved the rag with a revolutionary flourish. When he saw me he dropped it instantly. "Whoa! Hey, whoa." He scrambled to click off his player and snap the buds from his ears. "Hey. Didn't know you were here." He pulled his hair back from his eyes, looking like he wished he could scramble under the pews and hide. "Shit! Whoa!"

I walked toward him. "You were great. Glad I got to hear it." I shook his hand. "Lonnie Squires. I'll be doing some work with the congregation."

Long-lashed blue eyes opened wide, a glance that would drop

most women on the spot. “Reverend Squires. Hey.” He nodded his acknowledgement. “Sorry about using the s-word earlier. I’m Alec Manser.”

“Mimi’s son?” When he bobbed his head, I said, “I played soccer with her when we were about your age.”

“Younger.” He smiled. “I’m twenty-two, Reverend Squires.”

“Lonnie, please.” What was the Manser kid doing working for Woman at the Well? Mimi told me they’d left the Episcopal Church.

He must’ve read my mind because he waved his rag toward the pews. “I just graduated from Five Points, out on the dunes? I’m starting seminary there in the fall.”

I knew Five Points College, a tiny liberal arts college and graduate school seminary founded when the CLOSER church broke away from the other Dutch churches. It was one of three small Dutch colleges in West Michigan, and they triangulated a fierce rivalry in basketball.

“So, like, I’m required to work at a church, but not my own. So I thought, hey, check out the Episcopal Church, you know? Where the action is. Always in the news, the Episcopal church. Plus, my mom used to go here. Folks around here think I’m nuts, but it’s really different, you know?”

*Smart kid.* “You’re here a lot, then?”

“Ten hours a week, through December.” He slumped. “I polish things.”

McGavin had a young minister-in-the-making at his disposal for ten hours a week and used his talents this way?

“Course”—the young man shrugged—“this is only my second week. And I did help Mrs. McGavin when her computer froze up yesterday.”

“I see.”

Alec sighed, flung his rag onto the pew and flopped wearily beside it. Definitely a kid with a dramatic flair. “All this sh—” He caught himself. “Stuff needs to be cleaned before next Saturday’s big celebration. You know, for the GameTech guy.” He waved his arms in all directions. “Some of it hasn’t been cleaned in a

hundred years.”

I could feel the waves of frustration, the urge to escape, running off him like a riptide. Maybe the Lord had answered both our prayers today. “Maybe you could help me in the next few weeks. Get to know the congregation? And the community?” It would keep me from having to rely so heavily on Marion, plus I’d have someone else on the inside to maybe do a little creative snooping, if I needed it.

He grinned. “My mom told Dad you’re like Don Quixote, and the windmill’s gonna bust you up.”

“Wonderful.” I sat down beside him.

His big eyes deepened with genuine sympathy. “Don’t take it too hard. There’s not much anyone can do to please them.” He looked at his hands. “Cept go to seminary.”

I loved this kid already. “Tell me more?”

He pretended to look surprised. “Nothing to talk about.”

I knew that was a lie, but I decided to let it go. After all, he didn’t know me. “So, what is it you like best about church work?”

He looked as if he couldn’t believe anyone had asked.

“I know it’s not polishing,” I said.

He blushed, shifted his eyes, and I could tell he wasn’t going to say the first thing that came to his mind. A girl probably. Then he stood. “Singing. The acoustics in here rock!” His shout bounced from the walls and glass. “And working on the Interfaith Project House.” He jerked his body into the position of a man hammering a nail. “Pounding.” He jerked again, freezing as if he were pushing. “Installing drywall.” He jerked again. “Painting.” He hitched up an imaginary tool belt. “I’m a team leader for the combined middle school youth groups of churches one through twelve, and here, of course.”

“One through twelve?”

“First CLOSER through Twelfth CLOSER. You know, the first half of the twenty-three Christ the Lord’s Own Sainted Elect Reformed churches in town, plus this one. Randy, he leads thirteen through twenty-three, plus the Catholics and

Methodists.” He leaned down conspiratorially. “I’m way more fun, though. I’ve been teaching my kids show tunes in two and three parts to sing while we work.” He stood again, addressing an imaginary audience. “You should have heard them rockin’ on the entire soundtrack from *A Chorus Line*.” He froze in that position, then turned to me in an aside. “Some of those kids, it’s the first they’ve sung anything that wasn’t part of *The Little Mermaid* or *Veggie Tales* soundtrack. And don’t get me wrong, I love *The Little Mermaid*.” Then he performed a dead-on impression of Sebastian the crab singing “Under the Sea.”

I applauded. “I’d love to see your crew at work.”

“Sometime, sure.” He picked up his rag. “Now, I gotta do this.” He paused, then looked at me. “Unless...”

“Unless?”

“Unless you’d like to see the house now? You know, you’d learn something about the community, like you said. And you’re a priest, so I can hardly get in trouble taking you there. And it’s such decent weather outside, beats this place.” His eyes lit with a hope I recognized—a way out of the task at hand.

“What about the pews?”

“I’ll finish later, promise.” He crossed his heart with a finger. “For sure by next Saturday. It’s a whole week.” He wrung the rag in his hands. “Please? It’s so sunny.”

I checked my watch. Just before five. Plenty of time. And having at least one person on my side around here couldn’t hurt. I stood. “Okay, Alec. Let’s see this house.”

Since I had to go straight on to the game, we drove separate cars to a new, tiny neighborhood on the south end of town and pulled up at the shrink-wrapped house springing from a plot of dark new topsoil. Enormous tire tracks, stacks of lumber, a huddle of white pipes and packs of solar lights littered the front.

“This was an old rusk factory, but they knocked it down, you know. So, we’re doing some project houses. Just finished enclosing it last week,” Alec said as he hurled himself from his ancient Jeep. “We’re about to start digging in the underground sprinkling. Last week, it was a muddy mess out here in the rain,

but we'll be okay today."

"Who will live here?"

"A local Interfaith Council figures that out. We just work on it, with volunteer professionals, of course. Someone deserving. It's a great project. We try to do one a year. This is the fourth." He fumbled with his keys. "Normally don't keep it locked up, but the cabinets arrived yesterday, so we started. I got a key right here!" He held it up with triumph.

He led me around to the back door. "Try to come and go through the mud room back here," he said, "though the floors are all still plywood."

These four houses and a few additional overgrown lots melted into blueberries only half a soccer field away. For now, a nice place to live. Very private. Two houses across the street, one next door and nothing in back. "Nice spot."

"Yep." Alec hummed the song from *Les Mis* again as he unlocked the door. "Peaceful and happy." He led me into a tiny white room, clearly plumbed for laundry. "Usually pretty dusty since the drywall." He kicked an old pair of boots in the corner. "I leave my shit shoes—uh, work boots here. You okay in those?"

I nodded that my sneakers would work fine for now.

"Kitchen's through here." He waved a hand like a tour guide. "Even when there's a lot of banging, this place can be more peaceful than just about anywhere else in town. Especially lately."

White dust covered every surface. Cabinets waiting to be installed crowded the floor. Thick wires protruded from walls where outlets would eventually be.

Alec waved a hand over an unfinished island. "Living area over there." He led me on. "The southern-facing window is the best feature of this because—"

Without thinking, I reached out to steady him. I thought he'd tripped as his head toppled, his knees suddenly askew. His weight fell against me, knocking me into a wall where we both slumped for the split second it took me to see what he saw.

Vance TerMolen lay on his stomach in the middle of the living

room, head twisted to the side, eyes wide open, as if striving for an up close look at the puddle of bright red blood pooled out from beneath him.

## Chapter Thirteen

I brought my hands to my mouth. *Dead.*

“Oh, God! Oh no! Oh God oh shit nonono!” Alec slid down the wall, his face in his hands.

So much blood. Guilt and fear seeped across my skin like pond water. The man had called me God knew how many times in the last twenty-four hours, and I’d ignored him. What if he’d been calling for help?

I grabbed Alec’s shoulder. “Get up now!” No point checking on Vance, I could tell. We needed to get out of here.

Alec slid sideways against the wall and looked at me. “Tell me it’s a joke.”

I wish. “Get up. We have to go and call for help.” I pulled his arm and he rose behind it.

“I shouldn’t have ditched the polishing.” He glanced toward Vance and moaned. “Shit.”

“Come on.” I led him back across the kitchen. “My cell’s in

my car. I'll call the police."

Alec twisted away from me. "Oh, God. No. You can't. I mean, I can't." He spun as if looking for an escape, then plunged toward the body, patting it all over as if looking for an on/off switch. "Come on, dude. Wake up."

"Alec, he's dead."

Alec kept touching Vance, rubbing his back, lifting an arm, rolling him this way, then that. "Come on, dude. Please."

"Alec! You shouldn't touch him."

The young man stopped, wiped his hands against his pockets, then grabbed mine. "Reverend. Lonnie. Help. What'll I do?"

I looked at one of Vance's lifeless hands on the floor. "Come on."

He refused to follow. "They'll ask questions. Where I was, when, why. I can't have them asking. My parents." His eyes rolled back in his head, and for a minute I thought he was going to pass out, but then he looked at me again. "You've got to help me."

"Your parents aren't going to care if you didn't finish the polishing. Reverend McGavin won't either. I'll cover, say I demanded you bring me here."

He started to laugh. "Not the polishing. God!" He looked around again. "Look, there's footprints all over. Lots of them. A crew was here today. So they'll never know I was here." He grabbed my biceps. "Don't tell them I was here. Say you came alone."

He shoved his hand into his pocket and pulled out his key ring. It jangled as he spoke. "Just say I gave you a key so you could see the place, because I was busy, you know. I'll get into trouble for that, for giving you the key, but please, they'll ask a lot of questions and I can't. I just can't." He thrust a key at me. "Please!"

I didn't know what to think. "Alec, I can't lie to the police."

His eyes actually filled with tears. "Please. What's it matter? No one else will help me. My whole life is at stake, for real. Please."

He reminded me of little Missy Booer, sick with the flu,

having to listen to her mom gripe about taking time off work to “deal with” her, so sad. I wanted to hold him. “Okay.”

Alec hugged and lifted me, spinning me in a circle. “Bless you. Thank you. Bless you!”

I glanced at Vance again. “Put me down and give me the key.”

He did.

“You owe me one hell of an explanation later,” I said. He nodded. “And I know where you work. I know your mother,” I added. He nodded again. “Get out. I’m calling the cops in one minute.”

He didn’t even see me tap my watch, he ran out so fast.

Fifteen minutes later a slew of light-flashing vehicles arrived and I explained the situation and pointed the way. But I didn’t go back in. I placed myself on a pile of cinder blocks in the sun and tried to get warm and not see Vance, limp and bloody.

I sat long enough for my butt to fall asleep before two sheriff’s deputies in regulation brown, one a thick-chested man and the other a short woman with tight chestnut curls, came to talk to me.

The woman stuck out her hand. “Meredith Carson. Shore County Sheriff.”

She looked familiar and I knew the name. “Lorraine Squires.”

“Katherine’s niece?” she asked.

I nodded. “Your family run the garage out by Kate’s old cottage?”

“Yeah. My brother runs the shop since Dad died. I help on special projects.”

I remembered her as a kid. “You’re Red.”

She nodded and pointed a tiny thumb at her partner. “Don Loomis.”

I shook his meaty hand.

“Sorry ‘bout your troubles,” he said. I mumbled something in return.

“So.” Red hooked her thumbs in her belt loops. Maybe it was

the uniforms, maybe their guns, but suddenly I felt hotter than hell. It reminded me of the way some people react to me when I wear my full clergy getup and carry a prayer book.

I told her what happened. Everything in detail, except, of course, the truth about Alec. I spoke generally around that, not saying he was there or he wasn't, in case someone had seen him. Just stuck to my impression of things. She listened, didn't take a single note.

"I'm wondering," Red said, "if anyone has contacted you by phone in the last few hours."

"I don't know." I pulled my cell from my pocket, flipped it open and checked. Seven missed calls since noon, all from Vance. I'd turned the phone off when Jamie showed up so we wouldn't be bothered and hadn't turned it on again until I'd called the cops. Then I'd been too frantic to notice.

"Any calls?"

I could tell by the lift in her voice she already knew the answer.

"Seven from Vance TerMolen."

"Yes, ma'am," Loomis said, a worried look crossing his clean-shaven face. Clearly he was one of those sweet men who worried when he told a woman bad news, she might crumple into a heap of sobs—and then what would he do? "You have any idea why he'd do that?"

"Pestering me," I said, hoping I sounded solid enough to reassure him that I wasn't going to crumple. "He just liked to pester me." They looked at me. What else did they want me to say? "So, how, when did this happen?"

"This afternoon," Red said, gazing at the house. Vance was still in there, I knew. I didn't want to be around when they moved him out, if I could help it. "Boys think about two or so. Coroner'll know more."

I looked down at the missed call list. Vance's number, seven times between noon and 1:56. If I'd had the phone on, I would've picked up eventually, just to tell him to buzz off. But, God, I'd been having sex instead. I snapped the phone shut.

“We know,” Red began, “you’re involved with the situation at the church, a pretty emotional one. I gather Vance was involved?”

I nodded. “I know so little. I just had my first talk with everyone yesterday.”

“Did you talk to Vance today?”

“Yesterday.”

They studied me. I wanted to squash the phone like paper and throw it away.

“And are you in the practice of ignoring repeated phone calls during the day, Reverend Squires?” Red asked. “Weren’t you concerned it might be an emergency?”

“No,” I said. I saw her brow move as she made a mental note and that made me nervous. “It’s just—” They looked at me, eyebrows raised expectantly. “I went back to the hotel. I moved to the church cottage. I—” *God, shut up, Lonnie.* “I took a nap. I didn’t want to be disturbed.” That sounded good. “Then I just forgot to turn it on is all.”

*Christ. What kind of priest forgets to turn her cell phone back on? Someone could die.*

Someone did.

## Chapter Fourteen

I jumped in with a question of my own. "How'd he die?"

They looked at each other again, and I saw the worry cross Loomis's face. "Shovel. Someone whacked him in the back of the head with a shovel. Like swinging at a pitch high. And tight by the looks of it."

Red flashed him an annoyed look.

"At least he didn't suffer, Reverend," Loomis continued, offering me a hanky from his pocket. "Probably never knew what hit him."

What if Vance had needed help? What if I had called him back? Would he still be alive? *God forgive me.*

I gripped Officer Loomis's handkerchief, even though I wasn't going to cry. I wanted it to link me to the here-and-now, not to the what-might-have-been.

I swallowed.

"Shovel's gone. Killer too, long before you arrived and found

it,” Red added.

*Him*, I thought. Vance hadn’t been dead long enough to become an it. He’d had phone messages left unanswered. And God only knew what else left undone.

“We’ve called Reverend McGavin,” Red said. “But we know he wasn’t on good terms with the deceased.”

*Vance.*

“In fact, according to his cell phone, which he had on him when he died, twelve of the last fourteen phone calls he made were to you. Including one at one fifty-six this afternoon.” She looked at me. “Soon before he died. Do you know what he wanted?”

I pulled Loomis’s handkerchief through my hands. The sexual taunts from yesterday. I’d assumed he’d just wanted to continue them. But I didn’t want to say that, not now, not since he was dead. “No. We were old acquaintances. He liked to hassle me.”

Red nodded. “His phone also shows that he received two calls today. One from a pay phone out by the Silver Skates Motel at one forty-two, and another from Woman at the Well Church a little before five.”

The hotel where I stayed? The church where I now worked?

“So,” Red continued, “since you can’t tell us what Vance TerMolen wanted to talk to you about before he died, can you at least share with us why you called him only a few hours after his death?”

Suddenly, I didn’t seem capable of responding. Or of speech. Not even of thought. The vision of Vance TerMolen’s crushed skull, his open eyes, his cheek in the red puddle crowded out everything else.

“Whoa there, Lonnie,” Red said, her hand suddenly squeezing my arm. “Don’t go green about the gills on us. You need a paramedic?”

Even though I was sweltering hot, my teeth began to chatter. “No, I’m fine,” I managed before I clamped my mouth shut. Total lie. I felt like I was in a bad made-for-television movie. “I

was calling to set up a meeting for Sunday.”

“And you didn’t do that all afternoon because you were taking a nap?”

“Yes,” I said. “I’m here for a soccer reunion. It’s busy. We have a game at seven. I was tired and didn’t want the phone to interrupt me. I just forgot it.”

*Oh shit. Quit blabbing or they’ll ask even more questions.* I didn’t want to bring Jamie into this at all. She would flip out.

“Just a place to start, you understand, Reverend,” said Officer Loomis. “Last contacts and all that.” He looked steadily at his hanky wadded up in my grip. “We listened to his cell messages first thing. We’ll listen at home too, when a team gets over there. Tomorrow, by the looks of things.”

“Well,” I said, “you’ll find a message from me there too. Same thing.”

“Really trying to track him down, huh? After letting his messages sit most of the afternoon?” Red had a light in her hazel eyes that could’ve been attractive if she weren’t making me feel even worse.

I shrugged.

“He mention any of his recent work to you?”

“Nothing specific.” I remembered something about a history of the town and its citizens, Vance’s passionate speech about Middelburg’s false piety.

“Word says it’s got people up in arms,” Red said.

“Attacking Christianity, I heard,” said Loomis.

“No.” I wanted to defend the Dope. “Vance was a Christian.”

Loomis snorted. Red cut him a look I wouldn’t have liked to get.

“Vance was committed to the founding of a progressive Christian church in this town,” I said. Suddenly, it seemed important to do more for Vance than I’d done so far today.

“What’s that?” Loomis asked.

“Love God, love others,” I said. “Pretty much.”

“How does publicizing the town’s dirty laundry fit?” Red

asked.

"Even Jesus exposed the failings of the religious authorities of his time," I said.

"You are not comparing Vance TerMolen to Jesus," said Loomis, suddenly standing taller.

"Nope." Then I thought about what I'd said. "Well, actually, I guess I am, in a way."

Loomis took his hanky back from me.

"I take it," Red said, "you are one of these progressive Christians?"

Dangerous waters here. I didn't want to go on the record making any statement that could hurt my job prospects in the church.

"I honor what Vance believed." *Except about how to treat women. And probably a lot else.*

Loomis shook his head. "I don't get all these flavors of Christians. Glad I go to Frontline," Loomis said.

*Brady's church*, I remembered.

"With us, Christian is Christian. Not quite as closed as the other churches, but not going off half-cocked either. Nice and simple. Else I'd be arguing with Brenda all day Sunday. And it's supposed to be a day of rest." He chuckled, trying to lighten the mood.

"And on that note," Red said, "we won't take up more of your time, Reverend Squires, as you have a game to play."

I rose, checked my watch. I wouldn't quite make the start. Marion would be frantic.

As if on cue, my phone buzzed. "My team," I said, recognizing Marion's number.

"One last thing," Red said. "Can anyone verify your whereabouts this afternoon?"

She caught me off guard. "My—" *Nap*, I remembered. I'd said nap. "My nap?" I shook my head. "No, I nap alone, Officer Carson. Unfortunately." *Shut up!*

"Ah," she said. "Well, I hope you'll answer your phone if I call with more questions." She handed me her business card. "So

you'll recognize the number."

I felt guilt rising like a flush. *God, Vance, I'm so sorry.* How conceited did you have to be to assume that someone calling you seven times in two hours just wanted to express his lust for you?

As I headed to my car, I had another thought: if he wasn't calling to pester me, why was he calling?

I stewed on that one the whole way to the soccer field, but couldn't think of anything. The cops seemed to think his calls to me had something to do with his death, and if they were right, then I had something to do with his death too.

## Chapter Fifteen

I called Marion as I drove, so when I ran up to the bench at seven forty, everyone there already knew the bones of my story. Colleen greeted me with a big hug. “You poor, poor thing!” She patted my back. “Ready to play? Annika’s ready to sub out.”

For the next forty minutes all I did was run and kick. I didn’t think about anything except the ball and the yellow socks worn by the Belles. I charged back and forth, running down women much younger than me, clearing the ball up to our forwards. But their corner kick set pieces got us. Even with my height, I couldn’t block the headers from their forward, and watched in misery as they scored three. We lost four to one.

“Not as quick,” Romee, our goalie puffed on the bench after the game. “Old bones.”

“We’re barely forty!” Annika said. “But I know what you mean.”

Mimi Manser had been there after all, looking awkward in

her old jersey, barely breaking a sweat in the few minutes of field time she got. I wanted to catch up with her, see what she knew about who might hate Vance enough to kill him, but before I could catch her, I got blocked. An ancient bird of a woman with stiff jet black hair, dressed in a black polyester leisure suit and high-collared white shirt despite the heat stepped gingerly up to the bench. She locked eyes with me. "Father Squires." Her voice floated out soft as tissue.

The girls all stared at me, and I saw Char stifle a giggle. I knew her, of course, from the bishop's meeting at the church yesterday morning. "Mrs. Gellar." Senior warden of Woman at the Well. The senior warden is the head lay person of a parish, leader of the vestry, the elected body that controls everything from buildings and grounds to priests' contracts. I wiped my hands on a towel before shaking the one she held out.

Her velvety skin felt cool. "I understand Vance TerMolen made someone angry enough that he got himself killed. And you found the body."

The girls all stared at me again. I saw Marion shake her head, an I-told-you-so look on her face.

"Someone killed him, yes."

Kitty raised her eyes, and I could see they had a sharper edge than her voice. "He prided himself on causing trouble."

Was she blaming Vance for getting murdered? "When I spoke with him yesterday, Vance struck me as sincere in his desire for a more accepting house of worship in the community."

Kitty's face affected shock, but her eyes just watched me. "How tragic, to believe you are causing good when you really cause only pain."

I threw the towel around my neck and tossed my water bottle into my bag. "You think someone killed him because of the church split?"

"No." She folded her hands at her breast, the very picture of modest wisdom. "People who have secrets, Father Squires, have them for a reason. The reasons are not light."

"You don't have to call me 'Father.'" I hated that. It always

seemed like a passive aggressive refusal to acknowledge a woman's ordination. "Reverend is fine. Or just Lonnie." I lifted my bag. "You think he knew some secret? Something someone didn't want out?"

She blinked her folded eyelids. A soft fuzz covered the deep lines crisscrossing her cheeks. "I'm glad you are committed to reconciliation and will give no attention to whatever devilry Vance brought forth."

"If you know of someone who was particularly angry, Mrs. Gellar, maybe you should tell the police."

She smiled, but it looked pasty and cold. "It won't happen again, Father, you'll see. The secret is kept, and as long as the matter is dropped, whomever did it will live in peace."

"Really?" I couldn't imagine a murderer living in much peace.

"Keeping a new secret, true, but in peace. For the rest of us too. Frankly, Father, as much as I believe in the Anglican devotion to unity among differences, I'd begun to believe allowing his little group to leave our midst might be the most advantageous thing for all of us, even on my watch. But now we can perhaps move on with our congregational life." She patted my arm. "I'll see you in church tomorrow morning."

She walked away. "Big soccer fan," I said to the others, who had the grace to laugh.

Marion moved beside me. "Holy cow, that was like a scene from *The DaVinci Code*."

She sure didn't seem to care about catching a killer, I thought.

"Yeah," added Colleen. "She's almost as creepy as that albino. You think she's right about it being safe since Vance is dead? I'm worried about D.J. fixing bikes in our garage after dark."

"Sure," Char, my left fullback, said. "People like Star Hannes will have extra security out in force to prove how safe the community is to the Orion folks."

I almost laughed as I imagined Star's reaction to all of this.

"Char, you're confusing Lonnie." Marion put a heavy warm

arm around me. “That’s the last thing Star’s gang will do. You watch. Another day or two, and folks’ll be running around with their heads cut off about something completely unrelated to Vance’s death. Something safe to sink their claws into. Something *nice*. Anything but the truth. Because the truth’s what got Vance killed.”

In true church soccer team tradition, we spent the next several hours in Skinny’s B-B-Cue, which hadn’t been a barbeque in the twenty years I’d known it, but a dark, smelly bar with cheap pitchers of light draft, worn pool tables, and the thinnest crusted, freshest topped, sop-up-the-grease-with-your-napkin pizza around. We changed into jeans and such in the bathrooms, ordered up our pitchers, then reviewed our plans for the town council meeting Monday night. Everyone hooted and hollered when I reminded them I’d stay. The rest lived locally, so that meant the whole “legendary” championship team would be there to speak out for the rec center. Except Mimi, of course, who had to work for Star. At Char’s urging, the rest of us agreed to wear our uniforms for visual effect—she was a marketer, after all, and knew the importance of these things.

Just after nine, in that clear dark light that follows an early spring sunset, I headed home. I wanted to get to bed at a decent hour so I’d be fresh for church. I rarely got to just sit in a pew, and I wanted to hear the buzz about Vance and have another conversation with Kitty Gellar. Part of me loved her sense that maybe now, with Vance’s death, the congregation would pull back together. That would sure make my job a lot easier. But my stomach twisted at the thought. This hadn’t just been Vance’s doing—a group of other people still wanted to build a safe place for worship in their hometown. And besides, I had a feeling that putting a stop to the church division had been part of the killer’s goal, and that made me want to keep the conflict alive, just to spite the jerk.

That left me in quite a position.

I wondered where Star Hannes had been that afternoon. Then, with a little jump of panic, I tried to replay how much I’d

said to the Belles because, of course, Star's little minion, silent Mimi, had been there all along.

Suddenly, even though I'd be home in ten minutes, I wanted to talk to Jamie, to tell her everything that had happened, to hear warmth in her voice right now. On the fourth ring she picked up the phone, breathless. "What? Where are you?"

"Headed home. But listen, I've—"

"You did *not* pull me from a mineral bath to chitchat." She lowered her voice, and I envisioned her furrowed brow. "Just because I'm not working doesn't mean you can interrupt me whenever."

"I know." My chest burned. "It's just that—" I took a deep breath. "I found a dead man today." For the first time, a spout of deep sorrow pressed up from within me.

"You have got to be kidding me."

"Murdered, Jamie! He was murdered."

After a beat, she asked, "How?"

"In the Interfaith project house," I said. "A young man—" I stopped, remembering I couldn't tell anyone about Alec being there. "Told me and gave me a key so I could look around. The deputies said that he'd been hit with a shovel."

Another beat. "Why were you there in the first place?"

I slowed as I approached a four-way stop sign nearly obscured by overgrown bushes. "Well, it's important to the parish I'm working for."

Jamie just humphed.

"But that isn't the horrible part." I pressed the accelerator, reminding myself to watch the black shadows for tiny reflections, the eyes of deer about to cross the road. "He left me a bunch of messages last night and today, but I didn't call him back." I gripped and relaxed and regripped the wheel. "He called me just before he died, while we were...you know."

The pressure inside me released through tears, and I wiped my eyes.

"What did you tell the police?" Jamie's voice sounded tight.

"That I worked with him on a church issue, that I—"

“About where you were this afternoon. About why you didn’t pick up.”

I turned north on Haven Road, watching the thick woods and empty fields for deer. Two feeble taillights shone a ways ahead. “I told them I was at the hotel. Having a nap.”

“And what did you tell them about me?”

“Nothing. That I was alone. I didn’t want it to seem like—”

“You lied to the police?” Her shriek surprised me. “Lonnie,” she added, her voice now a controlled whisper, “are you utterly insane?”

“I didn’t want to bring you—”

“So, what? Now we have to figure out where the hell I was? Has it occurred to you I’ve already told people I was coming here? That if your cops find out about your housemate and asks a few questions, they’ll wonder which of us is lying? About what we’re trying to hide? Jesus Christ, are you retarded?”

I had to slow behind a pickup carrying two dirt bikes in its bed. “No one will find out about us.”

“When our stories don’t match, they’ll start to dig, just because it’s fun. And in case you’ve forgotten, Lonnie, it is *not* okay to be gay and outed in the press. Not if you want a professional career. Which I do. And so, I thought, did you.” She paused. “Jesus.”

## Chapter Sixteen

Only then did it occur to me that she hadn't asked who had been killed. "It was Vance TerMolen who died. One of the people behind the church split. An old friend of mine."

"Just figure out how the hell you're going to explain yourself to the police, Lonnie."

"How can you be so cold?" I asked, furious before I felt anger coming. I floored the gas and whipped out and around the slow truck. "You don't even care that someone died. You're as bad as everyone else. No one is sorry. No one feels badly. No one gives a crap that he won't go home tonight or—" The car rocked as I straightened into the right lane, remembering something.

"Are you finished?" Jamie asked. "Because it sounds like you're mad at someone other than me."

She was right and I mumbled a quick "sorry," because my mind had leapt to something else. Home. Vance had a puppy. He'd mentioned it at The Grind. He'd been killed at two, and it

was now after nine and the big deputy, Loomis, said they wouldn't get out there until tomorrow.

"My God, Jamie, he has a puppy, locked up in his house, I just remembered." I yanked the Honda into the first gravel drive. The pickup honked as it swept past. "I have to tell someone."

"Do not bring a dog into this cottage," Jamie said. "You know how I feel about dogs."

Yeah, I knew. We'd had that discussion since we started, and I'd given it up, for her.

I hung up, fumbled around in my bag until I found Red Carson's card, and called her. She didn't answer, so I hung up instead of leaving a message. She could be stuck for hours somewhere on the investigation. Vance's puppy needed rescuing *now*. He needed food and water, and probably a trip outside.

It was the least I could do for Vance.

I remembered the local gas station and quick stop back toward town. They'd have a phone book with an address.

Sure enough, within fifteen minutes I'd landed Vance's address and driven north again, then east to Vance's tiny house which stood in a cluster of pines in the middle of dark blueberry fields. No neighbors.

My headlights swept across the wood-sided place, old, not too well kept, and right now, very, very dark.

*Okay God, this is certainly a change from the day-care center.*

I sat in the car staring at Vance's dark house. *This isn't scary*, I told myself. He just didn't come home to turn on the lights. I shuddered and tried not to imagine Vance's head or all that blood.

I tried Red's number again, but still no answer.

I checked my watch. 9:36. This little pup had been alone since 1:30 or so. He'd definitely need to go potty.

I thought again of the list of missed calls displayed on my cell phone, all of them Vance's number. I thought of the hundreds of hours of cop shows I'd watched growing up, of Pepper Anderson, Jessica Fletcher, Cagney and Lacey, and Charlie's Angels heading into dark, spooky places. They survived.

“Okay,” I said to whomever might be listening, “I’ll try.”

A cool May breeze tossed my hair into my face, and I shuddered again, then slung on my zip-front hoodie. I walked up the headlight beam to the front door and knocked, although if anyone had answered from that dark, dark house, I would have yelped like a puppy myself. Nothing. *Help, help, help*, I prayed, *don’t let the pup be dead too*. I tried the front door. Locked. I knocked again. Nothing. Not even a puppy noise.

Now what?

This was a moment when I wished I had listened to Jamie’s regular always-be-prepared rant and had a flashlight in my car. But I didn’t, so I walked around the house in the dark, trying the back door and two windows.

I made my way around to the front and stood, thinking, at the edge of my headlights before I smelled it. I’d stepped in dog poop somewhere in the dark. Fabulous. I looked around for a stick, avoiding two other small and one huge pile of the stuff, and leaned against a tree to clean my shoe.

If I lived alone out here, I thought, without many neighbors, I’d have a hide-a-key. Especially if I had a puppy and the sort of job where I might get thrown off schedule. In case I had to ask a friend to look in on him. I studied the house. Where would Vance hide a key?

I tossed my stick and carefully walked across the yard. Vance had a few clay flowerpots filled with dirt by the side of the house, next to his garbage cans. I checked under it all and found nothing. I eyed the woodpile’s rot and mold, but decided no one would root through that. I couldn’t see any rocks or ledges or other obvious places. I guessed I’d have to walk around the house again, risk stepping in God knew what, and check back there for a key.

But first I decided to retrieve my stick. I might need it again. I sidestepped the poop visible in the headlights, marveling at the one monstrous pile. I sure hoped I didn’t find something like that in the house. You wouldn’t think a puppy could produce something—

I stopped, then bent to study the large poop. It was awfully big. I poked it with the stick and it moved as one piece. I poked it again, then tapped it, then hit it harder. It was plastic!

I laughed out loud because it would be so like Vance to hide his house key under dog poop just so he could tell people that's where they had to look. Just to be sure, I used the stick to flip it over, and yep, there sat two keys on a ring. Within seconds, I was in the house.

"Puppy?" I called, swiping my hand against the cool wall to find a light switch.

Metallic banging nearly drove me out of my skin. I shuffled in slowly, headed for the silhouette of a lamp I could see the in the edge of my headlights.

The thumping stopped until the light blazed on, then started again, louder and faster. I followed it through the sparse but neat living room, through a cluttered dining area into a tiny kitchen done primarily in Seventies harvest gold. Except for the avocado refrigerator. Next to that, in a rather smelly metal crate, stood a big-footed, floppy-eared pup of questionable cleanliness, his tail banging into the sides of his crate. Above him hung a wall calendar of all black German shepherds.

"Guess that's what you are, huh?" I bent over him to assess the damage. He had peed in his crate—who could blame him—and seemed to only have mussed up his feet. Cleaning him up wouldn't be so bad.

"Hi, uh...wonder what your name is?" I unhooked the door and scooped him up so he wouldn't pee on the floor before I got him outside. "Bet you have to go potty, huh?" Holding him at arm's length, I deposited him on the front lawn, then ran back in and grabbed a load of damp paper towels. I shut down my car, cleaned his feet, and together we went back into the cottage.

I wandered into the kitchen, wondering where to start. He couldn't stay here alone. It was too late to call Marion or any shelter. I eyed the crate. If I cleaned that up and took it with me, I could keep him contained. How could Jamie really object, just for a night?

I gathered more paper towels for the crate-cleaning job and searched under the sink for vinegar or bleach. “Okay, Vance,” I said, “where are the cleaning supplies?”

The pup sat on his plump butt next to me, studying the depths of the cabinet with gravity. I rubbed his ears.

“Do you know where the cleaning stuff is, boy?”

He cocked a head at me, then trotted his big feet over to two empty dishes next to his crate. He flopped onto his belly and rested his chin on one dish. I laughed and grabbed the dish. “Okay, message received. Puppy food first. Then cleaning supplies.”

I glanced over the stacks of junk mail and books and pens and CDs and the other assorted bits of normal life that covered the dining table. The next room looked like a bedroom. In the opposite direction, what looked like a bath and more. Laundry, I guessed, so I started there.

The intimacy of passing through Vance’s bath, even with the pup padding behind me, sent willies down my spine. A razor tossed to one side of the sink next to uncapped mountain-scented shave cream. A scrappy toothbrush. Hair gel. That made me smile. I would never have guessed.

Beside the dented washer I found a bottle of white vinegar and some rags and an unopened fifty-pound bag of puppy food. I tugged and pulled at the “easy open” paper strip across the top until I thought my fingers would bleed. I swore, I watched the puppy watching me. “So, little dude,” I said, “where are the scissors?”

I returned to the kitchen and opened a few drawers, trying not to disturb much. Red Carson and the others would probably already have a fit with the fingerprints I’d left throughout the place, but what the heck was I supposed to do with this little dog?

I stared at a butcher’s block of giant knives, wondering if I dared use one to slice open the bag, when I spotted a familiar red shape jumbled in a pile of change, paperclips and gum wrappers on the counter. That accursed pocketknife tool thing Vance fooled with, tapping it on tables. Just the right size blade.

I grabbed it and walked back to the laundry room where the pup danced around his food. I fumbled with the tools, pulling out two of the many before I found a blade and sliced the bag open. The puppy let out an insistent and shocking loud bark. We filled the dish, and as he settled into enthusiastic crunches, I grabbed the vinegar, more towels, and freshened up his crate.

We finished about the same time. “You’re just a baby, aren’t you?” I said, rubbing his back. “You need potty and food and play and some lessons. A new owner.”

Tears threatened as I thought that this little guy’s person wouldn’t ever be coming home. I thought of Jupiter, my dog growing up, and the day he hadn’t come home.

Together we folded his crate and heaved it into the back of my old Honda wagon. The pup trotted after me as I loaded his food, the leash and collar I’d found near the front door, then reentered the kitchen and picked up his metal bowls. “What else do you need, dude?” Some toys or chewies or something. And a name.

Suddenly I felt Vance’s presence heavy around me. Whatever he had named this dog should stick. “Can we find your name in here somewhere?” I sifted the stacks slowly. The police would be here tomorrow, and I certainly didn’t want to mess up anything about their investigation. Still, surely it wouldn’t hurt if I just looked around a little.

## Chapter Seventeen

A book on puppy training, a press invitation to Five Points College's upcoming graduation, about three dozen offers for credit cards or low mortgage rates, a map of this and neighboring counties. Phone books for every city within sixty miles teetered on top of an otherwise empty wine rack in the corner. The only folder there contained a pretty boring collection of the legal and technical documents for the proposed new recreation center, the construction of which Well's Belles would support at Monday's town council meeting. The only note was on a technical drawing of what looked like a stage. The words "sound and lights: Frontline" had been crossed out and someone had penciled in "Jack." Otherwise, I saw a few press clippings on Middelburg's mayor, Sterling Roosevelt, and informational pamphlets from Chrysalis, the local advocacy center for troubled women.

Chrysalis made me think of Aunt Kate. She'd volunteered there, said she did it because she loved the place's sad history.

Chrysalis was the first safe haven in West Michigan for women and girls who had been battered or sexually abused. A couple from Chicago who summered here started it in the 1930s after their daughter was beaten to death by her husband, and funded it in perpetuity with an enormous trust. "Infuriated a whole lot of people then and now," Kate had said.

Still, nothing here screamed motive for murder. Nothing with anyone's name or picture. Clearly, if he had been working on the town's history, he hadn't kept his notes here.

I opened the puppy book, wondering if I should take it along, and a card fell out. Exactly what I'd been looking for: a schedule for puppy shots, with a name.

"So, Linus," I said, "you're twelve weeks old tomorrow."

Linus thumped his tail.

I decided on one last look for a squeaky or something, or else I'd have to run all the way south to the Wal-Mart in Holland for a toy. A puppy can't go a whole night without a toy.

I hadn't ventured into the dead man's bedroom yet, but I thought, well, maybe there'd be a toy in there. I switched on the light and tried not to look around too much. Clothes lay piled on an armchair in the corner. Books and magazines and newspapers almost buried the tiny TV on the dresser. More books stacked on the floor. And in the middle of the unmade bed I saw it: a large latex squeaky toad, bright green with bug eyes.

"Is this yours?" I asked Linus as he jumped against the bed. He was too small to jump up. I bent over to grab the toad, trying not to disturb anything, and gave the toad a bunch of squeaks.

"Drop it!" a man's voice ordered from behind me. "And raise your hands."

My heart dropped faster than the toad, and both of us squeaked. I gulped air, swallowed a vision of Vance's bashed head and fought the urge to drop into a wailing heap. Beside me, Linus picked up the toad and shook it vigorously.

With my hands in the air, I couldn't see my watch. As I turned, the only thing I could think of was finding out the time. Until the blinding beam of the man's flashlight shrank my eyes

and I couldn't see anything. Except the gun he had pointed right at me.

*Gun!* My hands shot up even higher. "My name is the Reverend Lorraine Squires," I babbled. "I didn't take anything." Shit, that wasn't true, I thought. "Well, yes, I did, the dog crate. And some dog food. And bowls. But they're in the car. I was worried about the dog. He needed a toy. I was worried—"

The bright light snapped off. I blinked and saw the blond buzz-cut head of Deputy Loomis. "Shee-oot, Reverend Squires. What in heaven's name are you doing here?" He holstered his gun.

I almost sank to the floor, but sat on the edge of the bed instead. "Officer Loomis."

"We saw your car outside but didn't know what was going on. Thought it best to come in quietly, given earlier events."

Red Carson appeared in the doorway. "No one else here?"

I looked up at her. "I came alone."

Red studied me. "You didn't mention coming out here when we talked earlier."

My throat tightened. "I know. I mean, I wasn't planning this. Anything. But I thought of the puppy, on my way home. Vance's puppy and no one to take care of him. I was going home, then turned." I suddenly realized my heart was skipping like a stone across a flat lake. It had been the gun. I'd never seen one pointed at me before.

Linus leapt against my knees and dropped his toad onto my lap. I picked it up and tossed it toward the cops.

"I don't believe it," Red said, and walked away.

"Honest!" I said, sounding like a whiny kid even to myself.

Loomis shook his head. "She means she doesn't believe how stupid you are." He shrugged. "I guess you can go home, then. With the puppy." He scooped up Linus and the toad and handed them to me, then took my arm to help me up.

"His name is Linus," I said as we walked through the kitchen into the living room. "Vance had only had him about two weeks. I didn't think anyone knew."

Red stood in the living room staring. "What did you touch?" she asked.

*Best to ignore that.* "I called you. Twice," I said. "Your cell. You didn't pick up." It felt more than a little good to point that out after her ribbing of me earlier.

She frowned. "Did you leave a message?"

I shook my head.

No missing the triumph in her eyes. "So, let me ask again. What did you touch?"

"Well, I let Linus out," I said, "and he'd peed in his crate, so I had to find a towel and some vinegar and—"

"Wait." Red held up a hand. "Let me ask a different question. What *didn't* you touch?"

I told the deputies what I'd done since driving up, including touching doors and windows and the hide-a-key. Red winced when I admitted to going through the stacks of stuff looking for dog info.

"So Monday morning, you come to Town Hall and get fingerprinted," Red said. "So after we dust we know which ones are yours."

"To eliminate them?"

Red just shrugged, which I suppose was meant to threaten me, but which really just irked me. She didn't really think I'd killed Vance, right?

Linus chewed his squeaky toad until the noise made my head pound, but I let him. He deserved it after the day he'd had.

"You can go," Red said, thumbs hitched in her belt loops. "But no more visiting the houses of murder victims, got it? When murders haven't been solved, there's no telling what you'll stumble into. You're lucky you weren't shot."

Don looked a little insulted.

"If I hadn't come, this poor puppy would've been stuck in his crate without food or water until you people managed to get over here to check out the victim's house. Given the rush you *aren't* in, how was I supposed to know there could be anything important here?" Definitely a lame line of reasoning, but I had to

say something in self-defense.

Red studied me. "Go. But if you need anything else for the dog, buy it at a pet store."

I held up the key, reminding her I had not broken in at all and she made me hand it over. By then it was well after ten so, feeling foolish but righteous, I drove Linus home.

"Well, boy," I told him as he sat on the seat next to mine, "playing detective is more interesting than the toddler room, but absolutely not for me. I think I'll stick with being a nice, boring Episcopal priest." Linus wagged his agreement.

I guess I shouldn't have been surprised when Jamie shrieked at the sight of Linus then stormed into the bedroom and banged the door shut. I followed her as she set out her clothes for the next day at the beach and took a shower, explaining to her in gory detail about Vance, how I felt I'd failed him, how no one had even thought of the poor puppy, how Linus had been trapped in a crate, in his own filth, without food or water and could have remained there for God only knew how long. That the shelters were all closed at this hour and I had to bring him here. I played every angle of it for all the drama I could muster. She responded with an intent I'm-not-listening-to-you drama of her own, lips pursed, eyes locked dead ahead, slamming everything she touched. That told me she heard my every word. Finally, when she got out of the shower, I said, "Why not call Cheri Ricci and tell her what I did? You'll get all kinds of sympathy."

In the mirror in front of both of us, she looked at me, her dryer poised. "Don't pretend to care what I get out of this."

I touched her arm. "James, I love you, but sometimes, you have to give a little. This is life together. Like we promised in the blessing, right?"

She shrugged away. "I don't see you honoring my wishes or my career or anything except your own guilty conscience. Not what I signed on for."

## Chapter Eighteen

Jamie glanced at Linus who had followed me the whole time I followed her. “On the porch in the cage. And gone tomorrow. I’m not spending my vacation with *that* in the house.”

The hair dryer’s scream drowned out any further case I might make. Linus bolted at the sound, so I carried him into the living room and set up the crate. “I’ll sleep out here with you tonight,” I told him. “That way, you-know-who won’t hear any crying.”

I hadn’t had a puppy since I was about twelve, and I’d forgotten how much they potty. Linus and I visited the yard at two and four a.m. “No water for you after dinner tonight,” I told him as I shoved him in the crate again and tumbled back onto the couch.

At nine fifteen the next morning, I left the cottage and stood out front for a deep, calming breath. The clusters of pines smelled cool and Christmassy. Across the street, a fine mist rose between the rows of green blueberry bushes. I watched Linus do his duty,

then went back into the house to fasten my white plastic collar to the top of my black clergy shirt. Normally, I didn't do the priest thing when I just attended church, but I had a feeling that Kitty Gellar would like it. Plus, given what I'd learned about the local grapevine, everyone in the congregation would be curious about the new consultant who had, incidentally, found Vance TerMolen's body. I might as well help them spot me.

Jamie just mumbled when I said good-bye. I packed Linus and his crate and bowl into the car and headed south into town for the ten o'clock service. I confess to watching the mist and thinking about blueberries to come later this summer when a low black movement on the side of the road made me kick the brakes and swear. An enormous wild turkey, neck stretched high so she could see, stepped up onto the road from the drainage ditch. She bobbed forward followed by nine sister hens.

"Good morning," I said once my heart left my throat. This certainly wasn't like my commute down Lake Shore Drive. I drove the miles through sandy woods and blueberry fields without seeing more turkeys or a dozen cars. As I drove through town, I marveled at the overflowing parking lots of all the other churches, their services already well underway. Woman at the Well finally appeared across the park, a square one-and-a-half story clapboard that looked just like the houses wedged around it, except for the stained glass windows and stocky bell tower. Lazy lilac bushes burst with blooms all around. I had loved it since I first laid eyes on it.

I pulled into the tiny lot next to several other cars, most late models, gleaming like new. Not much got dirty or stayed dirty in Middelburg. At least not something everyone could see.

"Everything just sparkles here," my mom used to sing when she picked me up after my time with Kate. "Dutch clean."

"But it doesn't get that way by itself," I'd tell her, my knees and elbows still raw from the hours I'd spent scrubbing whatever my aunt had set me to.

I shook my head. I didn't want to think about Kate now. I extricated myself, Linus and his stuff, and took a deep breath,

stretching my neck and shoulders to help them relax. Another deep breath. *Here we go, Lon. It's game time.*

I felt the familiar energy crackle through my legs and arms, connected by my back and ribs. I knew the goal as clearly as I could see any net on the soccer field. Make a great first impression on the congregation. Prove my competence, earn Rector McGavin's confidence, and start to put together what men had tried to rend asunder.

*Oh, and thank Claris McGavin, the rector's wife and parish secretary, for finding me housing and a nice office. Mustn't forget that. Politeness impresses.*

I took a second to straighten my shirt and blazer and set my cell phone to vibrate, then carried Linus and his crate up the porch steps into the parish house. Everyone had already gone next door, so no one stopped me from setting up Linus in my office. Crate, water, a toy and a bone. I locked the door and waited. Didn't hear him cry—thank God—and headed to church.

I walked through the red doors, took a bulletin from the greeter and searched the pews for a good spot. The same shafts of light and wooden beams that had welcomed me so many years ago danced over the heads of about thirty.

But that was pretty much the end of the welcome. Everything about the service felt designed to distance all but the old guard—from the Rite One “thee” and “thou” formal language to the incense thick enough to make everyone sneeze and cough to the bulletins that gave no guidance except to refer worshippers to the *Book of Common Prayer*. Nothing wrong with Rite One or incense or the *BCP*, of course, but for the only service on a normal Sunday, it's certainly not how I would choose to do things. Not if I wanted newcomers and visitors and the disenfranchised to feel welcome. Even printing the tune for the “Gloria” would have helped.

Feeling vaguely unwanted was one thing, but the hostility of the sermon actually horrified me.

It started out weirdly confusing. McGavin made no reference at all to the week's prescribed lectionary readings, instead quoting

a passage from Deuteronomy: “If you do not diligently observe all the words of this law that are written in the book, fearing this glorious and awesome name, the Lord your God, then the Lord will overwhelm both you and your offspring with severe and lasting afflictions and grievous and lasting maladies.” Then he addressed the threatened church rift head-on, calling it, “One of those severe and grievous maladies that will afflict your children and your children’s children for generations to come.” That seemed a bit over-the-top, but okay—we all get a little dramatic in the pulpit.

Then he claimed he had the solution to ward off this impending disaster. I’m always leery of any person of faith who thinks they have “the” answer that will solve big complex problems for everyone. No matter what, it’s never that simple. Still, after his silence in Friday’s meeting, I was curious to hear what he had to offer.

That’s when the horror started.

My skin prickled and crawled across my bones, and it was all I could do not to clap my hands over my ears and run screaming from the church, taking as many people with me as I could.

“To solve the rifts in our church, both here and worldwide,” he said, “all faithful gay and lesbian Christians, if they truly love God, should remove themselves from the church.”

I nearly choked.

And not just this congregation, he went on to say, because, actually as far as he knew there were no gays in his church, but the entire Christian church around the world. It is their presence, he told us, that threatens the solidarity of the church in all denominations.

Part of me wanted to laugh out loud to think that little old me, Jamie, my friends, or any and all of us, had the power to bring down Christianity. Sounded to me like the good Rector didn’t have much faith in his God at all!

But I didn’t laugh. I was too busy freaking out.

“Well meaning but confused people,” he said, “are being led into sin as they attempt to support a twisted version of justice.

But supporting homosexuals in their sin is a stand against true Christianity. This not only leads upstanding, good-hearted people into blasphemy, it has the even more profound effect of demonizing the Christian church in the eyes of the world and costing countless souls the solace of knowing Christ."

This was the point where I wanted to run. I managed to stay in the pew, though, sweat running down my spine.

"Non-Christians around the world, people who might one day become followers of Christ, see Christians only as infidels because so many so-called Christians accept same-sex unions. In the eyes of the rest of the world, we are evil!"

Once again, I wondered about the strength of his faith in God.

"All of us who truly love the Church must save her from those who would mutilate the Gospel in this way," he said, encouraging all of us to go forth into the week keeping the Church herself foremost in our prayers. "May she be cleansed of the diseases that threaten her life."

So now I was a virus.

This was not the Woman at the Well I knew. In fact, it wasn't the Episcopal Church I knew. Nothing about the revolutionary love of the gospels.

No wonder Isabella's kids felt unsafe in church.

Still, I wanted to give him the benefit of the doubt. With the church splitting, the bishop bringing me in and now Vance's death, Peter had a lot on his mind. I could sympathize if he just wanted to threaten everyone into behaving themselves.

People greeted me during the peace and after the service, eyes lit with curiosity. I chatted for a few minutes, then headed to the relative quiet of the offices to check on Linus. It was after eleven thirty when I pulled him from the crate into a big hug, as much for me and for Vance as for him. He squealed with delight and licked my face. I kissed him square on the nose.

"You are a hiding place for me," said a soft woman's voice. Claris McGavin had worn a light gray dress patterned with tiny periwinkle flowers and lavender flats on bare legs. "You

preserve me from trouble. You surround me with glad cries of deliverance.”

“Psalm Thirty-two,” I said, with a silent prayer of thanks that I recognized the verse.

“Indeed.” She nodded, her straight gray hair shifting slightly. “I imagine Vance’s dog saying that to you.” Everything about her seemed pale and unadorned except for the bright light in her blue eyes. They seemed much younger than the rest of her.

And she certainly didn’t seem the type to be married to a hatermonger I’d just seen preaching in the church.

I rose. “Thanks. For the office and cottage too. It’s just wonderful.”

She patted her hands together. “We work hard to keep things orderly. The Lord blesses us with success much of the time.”

Work and orderliness were important in Middelburg where, folks believed, God rewarded his favorite sons with money and power. So to prove you had God’s favor, you showed off your money and exerted your power. As a kid, I’d heard many a huddled conversation about whose browning lawn or job loss indicated a life of hidden sin.

“Really, Peter, it just wasn’t right!” A woman’s voice echoed from downstairs. “Going on about disease and kicking people out of the church and not even mentioning him!”

“I believe the Lord removed him from this life for a reason,” Peter said, his voice flat. “Why would I want to bring him back among us?”

“Oh, dear,” Claris muttered and we both headed down the stairs. Peter stood blocking his office door as Isabella Koontz wiped her eyes. She heard us and turned. “You see, Reverend Squires? He is just mean.”

I suppressed a gasp, but it wasn’t the passion in her face that startled me. It was the blue-black splat of a bruise across her left eye and cheekbone.

Someone had hit Isabella recently. And hard.

## Chapter Nineteen

I turned to Claris who gaped at Isabella. “Can I trouble you for some coffee, please?”

Claris blinked as if coming back to herself, nodded, then scuttled through the back meeting room into the kitchen. I ushered Isabella up to my office and closed the door. She smiled as Linus jumped against her legs for attention.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

“No, Reverend Squires, I am not okay. I just got done listening to my priest scapegoat innocent people and terrify my children with old-fashioned nonsense about infidels and disease. I’m going to have to spend all week undoing what he just did. And I already spent this weekend dealing with my husband because Vance is a son of a bitch.” She winced at her own foul language. “Sorry,” she whispered. “Was.” Her lip trembled.

I settled Linus in a corner with a bone. “What happened?”

She rubbed her face in her hands, wincing as her fingers

touched her bruise. "Vance always talked up his project, finding out the truth about everybody. I figured he meant Star and the rector. But he meant *everybody*, including my husband, who wasn't too happy about it."

*Oh, Vance. You never knew when to stop.* "I'm sorry."

Isabella's tired eyes actually relaxed. "Thank you."

I wanted to ask about the bruise. "Do you want to talk?"

She waved a hand. "Oh, it was just business, like always. Something about the new rec center—plans, the bidding process, whatever." Her eyes cast around my office, alighting nowhere. "Ivor wants the contracts for the electrical work. He's the only local guy, has a pretty good lock on it unless they go to a firm in Grand Rapids. And Vance called him to talk about some irregularities in the bidding process." She touched her cheek again. "Ivor thinks since Vance and I work together here, I had something to do with it." Finally her eyes locked onto mine. "Like I know anything about the electrical business. I'm a mother, for God's sake. He told me not to talk to Vance about anything any more. Not even the parish. I was going to have to quit the committee." She ran a finger absently across her knee. "Not now, I guess."

I wondered if Vance knew Ivor beat his wife. Then I wondered how big a guy this Ivor was, and how hard he could swing a shovel.

"When did all this happen?"

"Friday night."

So Ivor had gotten angry and hit his wife, then Vance had gotten dead. I thought of Red Carson and of Isabella's privacy.

A gentle knock on the door announced Claris delivering two steaming mugs of coffee. She left the door open, but I stood and closed it again.

"Do you know anyone else angry at Vance?"

"He kept saying he'd found all this stuff out, but he never showed me anything. My husband is the only one who ever told me anything specific."

But he probably wasn't the only one Vance had egged on. "Do you know where he kept his files? Ever see him carrying a

laptop or a portable hard drive or anything?”

Isabella wiped her eyes. “No, nothing. He always wore the stupid jacket, carried the little recorder and that stupid pocketknife, but nothing else, ever.” She looked up. “Maybe the newspaper office? Or home?”

I made a mental note to call the newspaper office soon. If I could check his notes, I could find out if Vance really called Ivor about contract shadiness or something more. Maybe that’s why Vance had been trying to call me, to get my help with a domestic violence situation. It made sense. “Did you talk to him Saturday at all?”

Isabella shook her head. “Only to Jack, who thought that maybe, after the meeting Friday, we should reconsider pulling out of the parish. I was so mad at Vance after Ivor—” She wiped another tear. “I didn’t want him to die, though.”

I realized with a start that Isabella, like all those girls on the beach that summer long ago, had a crush on Vance. I touched her shoulder. “You’ll be okay.”

“And now Star Hannes can prove God’s on her side.” Her hand clenched the hot mug.

“Nonsense.” A cautious knock on the door and Claris peeked through again.

“I’m so sorry to interrupt, but Pastor Wesselynk and Father would like a word.”

Isabella looked at me. “What’s going on?”

I shrugged. “Beats me. Come on along, if you want.”

“Lonnie! Isabella!” Brady’s massive hand grabbed mine before I stepped off the last stair. “So pleased to see you again. Been looking forward to it.”

Suddenly, I remembered what Marion told me about West Michigan nice and my skin tingled. I looked at McGavin who didn’t look too happy either. He’d sat short and square the other day, but now he seemed tighter, his black hair graying at the temples and threatening to turn grayer even as I watched. His tidy little mustache trembled.

“Now I know I’m sticking my neck into your private business

over here,” Brady said, his hands up as if to ward off our annoyance, “but I was praying last night, and the good Lord, He said to me, ‘Brady, get yourself over to Woman at the Well and offer to help those folks straighten out my house.’”

This was it, the West Michigan nice thing, I just knew it. This howdy-do-I’m-everybody’s-camp-counselor-and-Jesus’s-personal-representative routine. If Marion was right, something else was coming.

Brady dropped his hands. “So I hightailed it out after my service and here I am. You can’t argue with the Lord, can you? Or with Star Hannes.” He chuckled at his own joke.

I wanted to ask him what delusional drugs he’d been taking when he thought the Lord had spoken to him so direct and homey-like, but I bit my tongue. *Be nice*. Peter looked like he’d just as soon spit us all out. Isabella stood, her mouth open slightly.

“When splits happen within the faith,” Brady continued, his slick blond hair immobile though he bobbed his head with fervor, “the whole community suffers. It’s a crack in the foundation of Middelburg as a fortress for Jesus.”

“Oh.” Peter stepped toward his office door. “Sounds to me like you want to talk to Lonnie and Isabella.”

“Oh, no,” I said, blocking him with a speed that probably wasn’t polite. “I mean, Peter, we wouldn’t want to leave you out of a conversation about your congregation.”

Peter’s mustache barely moved. “You’re the reconciliation expert, Lonnie.” His unveiled resentment squashed the words.

Brady sat, one haunch on the edge of Claris’s desk, smoothing his razor-creased khakis. “Now there’s a concept I don’t understand. Well-meant, I’m sure,” he said, flashing his big horsey teeth at me, “but really. Reconciliation? Where everyone compromises and values are lost? Aren’t we called to bring the Lord’s way to all others?”

I knew Isabella, Peter and Claris were all watching me. I could do a little subtle work for the parish if I thought fast enough. “Love your neighbor as yourself,” I quoted. “I think that meant even the neighbors you don’t agree with.”

Brady shook his head, smiling. "Is a person who threatens the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ my neighbor? And if he is, then am I not loving him best by defending the faith until he changes his ways?"

"I'm not sure that the definition of 'The Faith' is as clear as you make out," I said.

Brady laughed. "Of course it is. It's just cultural insanity that makes it hazy. Even in the well-intended, like you Episcopal folks."

Blotches of red appeared on Peter's neck, just above his stiff white collar. "What do you want, Brady?"

Brady looked confused. "Didn't you get the message? Star wanted to speak to us all about the Family Values Celebration, in light of the new circumstances."

Peter swung his gaze toward Claris who jumped and fluttered toward the phone. "The message light is blinking!" she twittered. "Oh, my, we normally just leave it until Monday. Emergencies go through to another line. Oh!" She fumbled the phone to listen.

"Never mind." Peter scowled. "It's too late now."

For what, I wondered? To prepare? Or disappear?

"We have a new opportunity to ensure that your congregation's troubles won't harm the community," said Brady.

"Are you talking about Vance TerMolen's *murder*?" I asked.

Brady nodded. "The Lord works in mysterious ways."

"I have squandered the inheritance of your saints," Claris said from her desk, quoting a sinner's line from confession.

I had just drawn the breath to rip into all of them about how no one, no matter what he has done, deserves to be murdered, and to ask them to please, for the love of God, stop hurling Bible verses, when Star, dressed in a suit of lustrous blueberry linen, swept into the room.

## Chapter Twenty

Behind Star came Mimi Manser and—surprise—Jack Putnam.

Star set her supple leather briefcase in the middle of Claris's desk, forcing Brady to stand. "Glad you're all here. I have a brunch in an hour." She looked at Isabella. "You might as well stay, as I've invited Jack."

The two of them exchanged looks.

Star distributed stapled papers to each of us from a file folder. "Here are the final plans for the Middelburg's Family Values Celebration. They go out to the concerned parties tomorrow, along with a proclamation of community support." She paused in front of me. "Every other congregation in town has signed this proclamation, and of course, I couldn't proceed without giving Woman at the Well a final chance to participate with your neighbors."

*West Michigan nice all around*, I thought as I scooped my hair

behind my ears. I hadn't really understood when Marion told me, then with Vance I'd forgotten, but today, it was like someone had turned a light on. I could see it. It felt insidious and creepy.

The first page was a general map of Central Park for the event. Food and craft booths, a dancing area, a mobile stage, seating.

"Your church certainly wants to join everyone else in supporting families," said Star.

"We support families," Isabella sniffled, "and you know it."

"And *you* certainly want," I said quietly, "to tell Orion that you got one hundred percent support from town for your plan. Less than that raises questions, doesn't it? Who didn't sign on? Why?"

Star's eyes tightened. "I sincerely hope you'll want to endorse it, now that..." She chose her words carefully. "Now that we all have a new chance to speak civilly to one another." She flipped a page. "The next page shows a schedule for the day. Klompen dance teams will perform both on stage and in the park every hour from nine until one."

"Klompen dancers?" I asked.

"Traditional Dutch dancers." Mimi spoke for the first time. "They make authentic costumes themselves, wear wooden shoes. They have to wear twelve pairs of socks to cushion their feet!" She hadn't looked this excited on the soccer field.

"Are you a klompen dancer?" I asked.

She actually smiled. "Oh, yes. Captain of the nineteen eighty-eight alumni Dance Team."

"Our teams aren't as big as the ones they have in Holland for Tulip Time," Isabella said, "but we involve younger kids, right down to elementary school."

"The shoes make quite a racket all over town when they dance," Jack said, "but it's fun."

"Next," Star continued, "you'll see the shoe carving contest at nine thirty and a traditional Meat-filled Pancake and Olliebollen Breakfast from nine until noon. At ten the combined children's choir sings. At ten thirty Mayor Roosevelt and I will present the

key to the town to Mr. Orion. At ten forty-five, the American Legion will play a patriotic program. And from eleven fifteen until noon we'll have a cakewalk with prizes from The Windmill Grind's bakery."

Marion was contributing to this? I made a mental note to ask her about that.

"The booths will be open all day," Star said, "with tatted lace, tulip bulbs and the like."

"A salted licorice booth run by Frontline," said Brady. "Goods donated by Salted Herring Homemade Candies." He looked mighty proud. "Carice van Peperstraten attends my church."

I figured she must be the salted fish queen.

We all followed Star to the next page of the handout. "This illustrates the details for the mobile soundstage, particularly lighting and sound."

I'd seen this page before, at Vance's house, in a folder with the rec center documents. There had been a handwritten change, though I saw none here. What had Vance written?

"There are only two state-of-the-art mobile soundstages in the upper Midwest," Star said. "I used my not-insubstantial connections to secure this one for our event."

I scanned the details, hoping for something to jog my memory. Most of it was gobbeldy-gook about amps and charges and volts and can lights and lavalier mikes and such. I'd given up on remembering, when I noticed Brady. His face had puffed up and gone purple. He looked like someone struggling to swallow something down the wrong pipe.

That was it! Frontline Church had been crossed off the sheet at Vance's house and Jack's name written in. I scanned again. No mention of Frontline or Jack, but a company called Pipedreams LLC appeared as contractor.

"Now, next," Star began, but I stopped her.

"I'm surprised that Frontline Church isn't providing your sound and lights," I ventured. "Given their experience with it." This was a Hail Mary shot, but from what I'd seen driving by, I had already guessed Brady's church would be a Broadway-style

mega-church, with plush seats, big screens, mikes, music and laser light shows.

"I'm a bit surprised as well," Brady said. His scowl crushed his furry blond eyebrows. "We had an arrangement."

Star waved her hand as if pestered by a fly. "Nonsense."

"But we discussed—"

"Precisely, Pastor Wesselynk." Star's eyes narrowed on him the way a hawk's would spot out a rabbit. "Discussion is not agreement." She smiled most pleasantly, but her eyes remained sharp. "We agree on so many things about Middelburg's Family Values Celebration. Your name tops the list of innovators. Surely, you don't want to withdraw support?"

This lady knew how to take people out at the knees. Everyone in the room knew she'd threatened Brady with the loss of what he wanted most: publicity. I wondered if she knew how to swing a shovel.

Brady swallowed and nodded.

"So who is this Pipedreams?" Isabella asked. She looked as upset as Brady.

Good question. If Brady wasn't doing the work, why wasn't Isabella's husband? She'd just told me he was the only contractor in town.

"That would be me," Jack said, flashing a goofy grin.

The only person in the room not shocked was Star.

"Jack?" Isabella said.

"I thought you were a middle school counselor," I added.

Jack put on his best sincere face. "I want to retire early. Need a new career. I've always dabbled in this stuff, you know? The market's opening up." He avoided Isabella's gaze. "Star's giving me a great opportunity."

Interesting. I wondered when this had come to pass. Obviously Vance had gotten wind of it before he died, because he had that note on the sheet in his house. Is this why he'd called Ivor Koontz? And why would Star ditch her pal Brady to give a chance to someone who'd been on the enemy team? Had she cut a deal with Jack—a job for his agreement to stop the church

split?

I studied Jack, his lanky body leaning in a doorway, ponytail draped over his shoulder. He didn't look like he'd whack a man in the head, but would he to finance his retirement?

And Star, with her perfectly coiffed hair, the string of pearls, the blueberry suit snug over slender hips. Gold draped at both wrists. Unquestioning followers. A chill trickled over me. Determined, physically fit, calculating. I wondered where she'd been on Saturday afternoon and if she owned a shovel.

## Chapter Twenty-One

“As you can see,” Star said, “this will give us a tremendous opportunity to show the good people of Middelburg united in a way of life, sharing a common sense of what’s right in the world. Common. In unity. A community.”

I got the feeling she wanted us to applaud her wordplay, but I knew Aunt Kate would roll in her grave if I did.

“What about the people who don’t agree with you?” Isabella said.

“Who doesn’t support strong families?” Star asked.

“Depends how you define ‘strong’ and ‘family,’” Isabella replied.

“Let’s not rile things up,” Jack said.

Isabella looked mad enough to hit him. “Are you really the pussy Vance said you are?” Isabella blushed at her own language, but I loved her for it—she was the only one who had honored Vance at all. But Jack had a point too. If I was going to have

any chance reconciling this church, I had to find some area of agreement between church and Star. Then she'd back off and we could all just focus on the church.

"What if," I asked, "instead of signing the proclamation, we just run one of the events? Star, you'd still have your one hundred percent involvement. And no one here would have to sign anything. There'd be a place for everyone without forcing everyone to agree on every point."

This was the same sort of speech I'd given just a few days ago to two toddlers fighting over a stuffed dog. It hadn't worked on the Little Lambs, and I could tell by their faces it wasn't working on these folks either.

Thoughts of the toddler room and the toys and games stacked on every surface gave me an idea. I flipped to the park map. "What if you made some room for a toddlers' game space?"

"I did notice you had nothing set up for little kids," Isabella said. "They're part of our community too."

"It wouldn't take much space or money," I said. "Sidewalk chalk, a beanbag toss, balloons, prizes." I listed everything I could think of from the Little Lambs room.

"The church has buckets and buckets of chalk," Claris offered.

"I could ask for middle schoolers to volunteer to help out," Jack said.

"I'll buy peace balloons," Isabella said. "And a helium tank."

"Nothing anti-war," said Star.

"It's not—" Isabella began, but I interrupted her.

"Just blue and white then," I said, glancing at Isabella. She knew as well as I did that blue and white were international colors for peace.

"Yes." Isabella almost smiled.

"For Delftware," I added, in what I thought was a moment of inspired brilliance. *Thank you, thank you, thank you.*

The good Lord decided to give me a break, because lo and behold, everyone agreed. Peter looked grumpy, but Star looked satisfied.

"I think it's a mistake," Brady said suddenly.

I wanted to punch him.

He turned to Star. "Why involve them? They won't sign the proclamation. Why not stand firm in your belief that what they are doing here is wrong? Make your statement by leaving them out, as clear as God's great light to Mr. Orion."

Star pursed her lips and, oh man, if looks could slice a man's heart out...

"Better not to bring it up at all," I said. "This way, it's Middelburg: one big happy family. That's what you want, isn't it?"

Star glanced at me with an almost imperceptible nod and snapped up her briefcase.

"Bye," Claris said to Star as she headed for the door. "Let's visit the mall again soon."

Star nodded to her, then, with Mimi close behind, left the parish house, her conservatively heeled blueberry pumps again mysteriously silent.

I was reminded of how vampires can't see themselves in mirrors and wondered what unholiness might be signaled by silent high heels on old wooden floors.

Brady slid from the desk. "A convenient compromise, but I can't agree it's for the best. Everyone's position is watered down." He looked at Isabella. "What does it really teach the children of this town?"

"What do you mean?" Isabella asked.

"Your parish is torn apart, yet you are welcomed in this event to work with children? Does the town condone the breaking up of faith the moment it becomes inconvenient?"

Jack, Isabella and I all jumped in at once, protesting that the church situation had nothing to do with convenience.

Brady looked directly at Peter. "We know, don't we, how easily children can be lost. Even after your valiant efforts with Ruth."

Peter's face turned murderous, but he remained silent. Claris froze.

*What's this? A McGavin family secret?* Jack and Isabella looked as confused as I, but I wondered if Vance had known.

Brady smiled at me. "Wonderful thing about women," Brady said with a glance toward Peter, "how they struggle to form unions, seeking husbands and then children and then grandchildren, all around them, to give joy to their lives. So of course you'd naturally be inclined toward reconciliation, bringing people into families. More so, no doubt, since you are not yet married."

My hackles rose. "What does—"

"Still," Brady interrupted me, "as awesome as the good Lord made women, he made men with different abilities. The abilities to defend nations and faiths and churches against the sinful, innermost desires of depraved people. The ability to drive them from among us and destroy their power."

I wondered if Peter had talked to him before giving that sermon this morning. "You want to drive Jack and Isabella out of town?" I asked.

Brady sighed and stood. "Of course not. I want to love them, welcome them into a Christian community. But if they don't want to support the community—"

"Then what?" asked Jack, upright now and eyes flaring.

*Good for you.*

Brady shrugged. "The Bible suggests many ways to honor the Lord by shunning the unrighteous."

"Shunning?" I asked. Peter had clearly taken a page from this guy's book. "Shunning?" I was just gathering steam to let loose about the uncivilized horrors of shunning or blackmail or gossip or whatever else he was up to, when Peter took Brady's elbow and gently turned the big man toward the door.

"Brady, we will prayerfully consider what you've suggested. Lonnie will get back to you later in the week."

Brady glanced back toward me and I nodded. Anything to get the man out of the room.

"The Pastors' Prayer Roundtable has our monthly breakfast next week, if you'd like to come as a visitor," Brady said to me over his shoulder.

NASCAR speedsters couldn't drag me there, but I didn't respond because he was gone. I fell into a side chair. "What the heck was that?"

"That was Brady Wesselynk," Claris responded. "He does stir people up."

We all savored the understatement for a few seconds and then began to laugh, and for the first time, I felt hope. If we could laugh together, anything might happen.

The rest of the day kept my spirits lighter. The Belles piled into three cars and drove to Grand Rapids for a late lunch because nothing is open in Middelburg on Sundays. After that I drove to Holland to stock up on a week's essentials, 3 Musketeer bars, Cap'n Crunch for me, and granola for Jamie, turkey, whole wheat pita, yogurt, milk, fruit, coffee, half-and-half and pre-mixed margaritas. Marion's kids, Cameron and Mitchell, had watched Linus all afternoon and when I picked him up, he was one floppy puppy. Nothing like elementary school boys to poop a puppy out.

Jamie wasn't home when I got there. Probably at the beach, enjoying the warmth of late afternoon sun and a clean lake breeze. I knew the presence of the dog aggravated her, but seriously, what could I do? Dump him by the side of the road? I owed Vance more than that.

But I didn't want to think about Vance or Star or Brady or any of the other people of Middelburg who weren't soccer players. I needed an evening of not thinking about it at all so I could report to church for work fresh in the morning. I wished Jamie would come home and distract me. I dialed her cell and left a message.

As Linus and I wandered through the cottage, the slanted light revealed some cobwebs and gathered dust I hadn't noticed before. Time to clean house, mentally and physically.

The dark panel of the front room, where a couch and TV stand, small bookshelf and small dining set lived, seemed particularly prone to gathering strings of sticky webs. The kitchen, large and clean and dreadfully outdated, with turquoise counters and a turquoise and silver wallpaper patterned with

antique ironing boards and washtubs, cleaned up much more quickly. The western exposure made it the most pleasant room in the house this time of day. The one small bedroom, like the living area, was dark paneled and a bit musty, but open windows helped move the air from the sunny kitchen through it. In the back of the house, the one small bath and utility room looked and felt like a damp basement, with concrete floors and cinder block walls. But the shower was spotless, if cold on the feet, and the utility room housed a spanking new washer and dryer. Considering I was living for free, it could get a whole lot worse than this.

By six thirty, I'd conquered the must and dust and, wishing I could clean up Woman at the Well as easily, I decided to head to the beach to look for Jamie. I grabbed a sweatshirt in case the sunset got cool, crated Linus and drove the few miles to the almost deserted township beach on Lake Michigan.

No Jamie. I debated going back. I hadn't left a note at home, and I had left the dog. If she beat me home, she'd be furious.

Still, I was hot and sweaty from cleaning and suddenly so very, very tired of feeling sad and sorry about Vance. I decided a few moments with the water couldn't hurt.

I kicked off my shoes and found the sand cool and dry. The silvery singing sands of the eastern shore of Lake Michigan are probably the best-kept secret in American coastlines. And thank God for the secret, or else this empty white sand would look like a beach on Maui. Too many too-skinny, too-tanned people.

Today, the water tossed with a fine brown chop, little mixed waves poking in all directions, flapping gently at the sand. I walked toward the water, the sand singing beneath my feet. It's almost like the shoop shoop of nylon windpants, but more melodic and more solid at the same time. The first time I'd heard it, when I was thirteen, it seemed like one more uncool, weird thing about this place. Today, it reminded me that not everything in my life was completely out of tune.

I left my shoes and waded, the icy water sucking the breath out of me. Still, it cooled my steaming soul. I stared out to where water met sky, wondering about my place in something so vast. I

got reminded that in the all of creation, my situation was really very mild.

“Thank you,” I prayed aloud. I’m not sure how long I stood there, but when my toes went numb, I figured I’d better head home.

No sign of Jamie at the cottage. No messages on my cell. My tiny, dark living room seemed larger, emptier and darker.

Fresh strawberries mixed in with organic yogurt sounded like the perfect end to the day, but the foil protecting the yogurt was obstinate. I stuck my hands in my pocket for a key or something sharp because it was too far to walk across the kitchen and my teeth wouldn’t work.

I pulled out a red multi-tool knife, snapped it open, and just as I stabbed the foil, I froze. This wasn’t mine. It belonged to Vance! I’d used it to open the dog food when I got Linus. I must’ve stuck it in these jeans yesterday and forgotten about it.

*Oh, shit.* How much trouble was this going to get me into?

## Chapter Twenty-two

Did stealing something from a murdered man's house constitute a crime even if you did it by accident?

I took Linus out to go potty underneath the blue-black sky and considered whether I should call Red Carson and confess. The pines around me heaped in darker shadows, and a first star winked at me from the south. Peeper frogs screed at me from the blueberry fields, and I imagined all the nightlife coming forth. Deer, snakes, raccoons, skunks, toads, frogs and armies of beetles and moths.

Walking in the dark woods was the one thing Aunt Kate told me to do that I never did. She always thought a kid like me ought to be out conquering fears. "Pretend you can see at night," she'd say, "and soon, you will." She'd called me a sissy when I refused, made me do all the kitchen clean up for a week because, "That's the sort of evening work sissies do." I wanted to prove her wrong, but the owls and whippoorwills and cracking trees and black

blackness of the woods scared the crap out of me. And until she died, she never let up.

“You need to get some guts, Lonnie Squires,” she’d said a thousand times. “Or you’re no niece of mine.”

“Grand niece,” I’d reminded her once. “And fine.”

*Truth is, I thought, fingering the knife, I kind of like having this bit of Vance with me.*

Just before ten, Jamie stumbled in, sunburned and smelling like gin. She’d gone to a Grand Haven tanning salon then out with some girls she’d met for a few drinks. When I said I’d missed her, she snapped that it was her vacation, and since I still had that damned dog, she could do what she wanted, couldn’t she?

As I fell asleep, I thought again about Cheri Ricci and what was really making my partner so distant and mean.

Monday dawned with the same low mist, but the electric blue skies above promised a clear afternoon. I felt low and misty after a dream in which I wore a blue uniform on a soccer field and everyone else wore red. In the stands—and they were big, major league football sorts of stands—men in white caps and wooden shoes hawked unidentifiable foods that all the fans, also wearing red, devoured.

I chowed my Cap’n Crunch and stared at the pattern of ironing boards and washtubs until it swirled. Today, I would start straightening that church out. Get the people of The Well on the right track, collect my letter of recommendation and get my new job.

I packed up Linus and left before Jamie even stirred. I looked for but didn’t see the turkey ladies and pulled into Woman at the Well just after eight. McGavin’s black Mark V stood with several other cars in the lot.

Claris sat typing, a bit more relaxed today in a lightweight lavender sweater, dark slacks and the same lavender flats. While it was one thing to work for a rector who believes you genetically unqualified for ordination, bad relations with the parish secretary could make your life hell. So I paused for chitchat.

“Great shoes,” I said. “I noticed them the other day.”

She blinked, surprised. "Thank you. They're new."

"The coffee smells heavenly." I led Linus through the reception area up to my small office. Today I wanted to read through as many parish records as I could, get a handle on things like membership, giving and the parish mission. During disputes, people often tossed around numbers that simply weren't true to strengthen their arguments. I wanted to see how much the parish really had suffered under Rector McGavin's recent leadership. I didn't want Claris to know that's what I was up to, I didn't know if she might hide information to protect her husband.

I wandered back down to her, hoping my face looked a little lost. "Claris, can you help me? I want to get to know the parish, understand the good work you and Peter have done here. Do you think I could look at the annual reports for the last five years? The stewardship records? The last few parochial reports and any parish profiles you've done?"

Claris smiled. "Absolutely. I have it all filed chronologically, by document type."

Of course she did. I envied the speed with which she put her hands on everything I asked for. "And," she said, adding another two inches of paper to my thick stack, "I think you might look at the parish newsletter. Here are the last two years."

"I hope I have an assistant like you when I become a rector," I said as I hefted the stuff.

She blushed. "I take pride in doing good work. For Peter, you know."

"I know," I said. I felt the same about Jamie.

Two hours and three cups of coffee later, I had a much better understanding of what I'd gotten myself into. It looked like Woman at the Well's troubles had started in late 2004, a year or so after Gene Robinson had been elected the first openly gay Episcopal bishop. There'd been trouble throughout the Episcopal church for a while as congregations either supported or denounced the bishop and parishioners moved around to find churches that matched their views. In some places, conservatives left their churches to found new ones—just like the founders of

Middelburg's CLOSER church had branched off over and over until they formed this little enclave where the rest of the world barely touched them. It made sense, in a way, that Woman at the Well's situation was the reverse. The liberals, finding themselves with nowhere else to go in this conservative town, wanted to establish a safe haven of their own at home.

From the records, it looked like talk of the split had started in earnest about a year ago, and I noted with interest that donations to the parish had dropped nearly twenty percent in that time. Over ninety percent of the rest of the money came from two donors—a dangerous situation for any nonprofit that relied on donations to survive. Who, then, really ran the church? Because the church kept giving records confidential, I couldn't know who these donors were, but I'd bet they were conservatives, well fed by the kind of sermon I'd heard Sunday morning.

Bishop Tappen had initially tried to stop Vance and Company's new congregation until Vance—who else?—had studied up on church canon and discovered that if the bishop wouldn't recognize them, they could go to some other bishop who would. The bishop was far too egotistical to lose a congregation to someone else, but he'd failed to reconcile the congregation. I wondered if he'd heard about Vance's murder and whether or not I should call.

So, I thought as I leaned back to stretch, liberals feeling besieged, conservatives supporting intolerance with cash, a rector who needed that cash to keep his congregation afloat, and now Vance dead after threatening to reveal people's secrets. Passions like these made those involved in a church rift desperate, and desperate people rarely did wise or compassionate things. I had my work cut out for me. What could draw them together? What value did they share?

A light knock made me look at my watch. ten fifteen. Red Carson stuck her curly head in my door. "Got a minute?"

"Can I say no to a cop?" I pushed the empty chair toward her.

"Not during a murder investigation." She looked at me, the

corners of her eyes crinkled. "Thought you might like to know some of what we've found out about Vance." After I nodded, she continued. "Time of death just after two p.m. He'd eaten tacos at Ventura's, corroborated by the owner. But as best we can tell, in the last two hours before he died he talked only to the person who called from that payphone. You know, in your hotel."

My right foot started to jiggle. "I didn't call him."

She looked at me steadily. "Yes, you did."

My heart kicked my ribs. "No, I didn't. I—" I stopped. *Duh!* "Well, yeah, from my cell. I meant I didn't place that payphone call."

"The message you left was a little angry. Would you like to comment on that?"

I thought back over my banter with Vance. He'd pissed me off, but I didn't want him to see how much. I just goofed around. "I—I had told him earlier to drop dead."

Red studied me again. I hated it. I realized my knee was bouncing and willed my leg to sit still. "Well, that's plenty reason enough to feel guilty, huh?" Red asked.

*That, plus ignoring Vance*, I thought, but didn't answer. Hiding Alec's presence. Pissing Jamie off with the puppy. Not listening to Marion and getting involved in all this. Quitting the school job. Hating the school job. God, what *didn't* I feel guilty about?

Red redirected the conversation. "We are still hoping to grab a lead on that call. It might be nothing. It might be important. In police work, you gotta assume it's all important until you find out otherwise."

"Same in the priesthood," I said. "And the minute you assume something isn't important, you get bit in the butt."

"Because someone dies," Red said, then smiled a soft, genuine smile. Her whole face loosened to match her wild, dark curls when she smiled. "Don't think we haven't all thought about those phone calls you ignored."

*Fabulous.* I must've made a face, because she kept going.

"I mean, how easily it could have been one of us. We all let stuff slide now and then."

That was the first sympathy I'd heard since finding out Vance had died. "Thanks."

She nodded. "I also came to ask you about Alec Manser."

My heart whumped. She'd sucked me right in with the sympathy routine. "Alec?"

"It's odd. A lot of the folks who work on the Interfaith Project House leave stuff there. Paint clothes, work boots, even some special tools, you know?"

I nodded.

"Well, it seems the killer wore Alec Manser's work boots during the attack."

*Weird.* "You sure?"

"Of course, the place is a dusty mess of prints. We're only sure of the boots because blood spatter patterns indicate—"

I cut her off. "No details. I believe you." Alec's boots? My mind whirled. "Do you think Alec did this?"

"We collect evidence, Reverend Squires."

"Meaning you don't think?"

She narrowed her eyes then decided to laugh. "We keep open minds."

Well, my mind was racing back through Saturday. I'd been at the church a little bit before Alec had arrived. He'd been singing and dusting and didn't look traumatized or bloody. But could he have killed Vance before that, then used me to witness a faked finding of the body?

My gut said no way. The kid had issues, but murder wasn't one of them. Still...

"So if not Alec," I asked, "who put on the kid's shoes to murder Vance? And why?"

## Chapter Twenty-three

“The way I figure it,” Red said, “anyone whose feet would go in those boots could’ve done it. Used them to protect their own shoes, leave no footprints, that sort of thing. Which indicates one pretty important thing.”

“Whoever did it knew there were boots there to use,” I said.

Red nodded with approval. “So someone who’d been in the project house. Which is just about the entire town, either working on it, or just nosing around. It wasn’t locked until a few days ago.”

So that didn’t seem a promising lead. I thought of something I’d wondered about earlier. “Did you find Vance’s notes yet?”

Red slouched more comfortably in her chair. “I wish. We’ve been through the house, his office, his computers. Nothing. Tony, the newspaper editor, isn’t very happy about it. Vance kept promising him some big story for next Saturday, and now he’s got nothing.” She took a breath. “So, did Alec Manser seem upset

to you when you saw him Saturday? Before Vance, I mean.”

I shook my head. “No, why?”

“Changes in behavior are interesting, particularly when a murder’s been committed. Maybe someone’s been lying, and I like to know why.”

I thought again about not telling her Alec had been with me, about omitting Jamie from my own alibi. “Alec’s behavior changed?”

“I pulled his community service schedule, and he’s not supposed to work on Saturdays. So what kid volunteers to come work in a dark church on a sunny spring afternoon?”

Good question. Especially since he hadn’t wanted to be there, which is how we ended up at the house in the first place. “Have you asked him?”

“Says he was behind on his work. Maybe so, with the big celebration coming up.”

If he’d come in to catch up on work, why’d he take me to the house? I started to think it was time to collect the explanation that kid owed me.

“He must’ve had something to gain,” Red said. “No one does anything without thinking they stand to gain.”

“That’s a pretty grim view of humanity.”

Red tipped her head. “Maybe. Or maybe you can afford to be more optimistic in your line of work.” She stood. “Well, make sure you give me a call if you think of anything you may have omitted before.”

Oh, God, did she know I lied about Alec? I forced what I hoped was an earnest expression. “Sure,” I said.

She hadn’t been out of the office a minute before I dialed Alec’s number at Five Points student housing. He picked up just as Claris popped in to hand me a pink message slip. Colleen Brink, one of the Belles, had called.

“She indicated it was fairly important,” Claris said.

I thanked her and returned to Alec. “We have to talk right now,” I said. “Tell me how to find your place.” He could tell by the tone of my voice no excuse would free him. He gave me

directions and agreed to meet me in twenty minutes.

"I'm out of the office," I told Claris, "probably until after lunch."

"Okay," she said with a cheery wave. "Be sure to go to Marion's and have the buttermilk pop."

I peed Linus, threw the toad a few times across the church lawn to help him burn some energy, then drove south along the lakeshore on a winding, tree-lined road. Eventually, I turned right, up narrow curves cut into the side of the dune. The sun blinked through the towering beech trees, with their trunks like elephant legs and their tiny leaves the shiny green of spring. Five Points College and Seminary had been established in the 1850s, part of the scattering of small colleges founded throughout the northern Midwest by various churches. I'd heard from Marion how in the last several years Five Points had shifted gears from its devotion to liberal arts to cater to the rising wealth and power of the evangelical right by introducing a Bible-based curriculum. The thought gave me the creeps.

Still, I knew I was being unfairly judgmental. Plenty of smart, open-minded people probably worked here. I just wondered how much of themselves they had to hide to survive.

I could certainly relate to that.

Was Alec Manser one of them? What was he hiding, the secret that made him terrified of the police?

The phone interrupted my speculations—it was Colleen again. I'd forgotten to return her call.

"Lonnie, it's D.J." Colleen's voice caught, and my heart roared. "He's in trouble."

*He's only eight, I prayed. How much more trouble can there be in one small town?*

"What happened?"

"It's his bicycles. You know, we buy broken up ones and he fixes them to earn extra money. Since his father..."

She paused. I hadn't been in town in over a decade, but I still knew the story of Colleen's husband, the disappearing scum.

"Well, a sheriff's deputy came by yesterday and took all his

bikes. Just loaded them in a van, lights flashing and everything. Said D.J. is running an illegal business and someone had complained. The town council's voting tonight on whether or not he can keep doing it and whether or not to fine us! Up to three hundred dollars!"

"I'm so sorry." Relieved, though, that he wasn't hurt.

"Jesus, Lonnie! When Vance isn't even in his grave, the cops are worried about a kid fixing bikes. What kind of place do we live in?"

*Good question* I thought, as I passed through the entrance gates to Five Points. Would the town leaders really do something like that to a single mom and her kid? Good people lived here like Marion and Colleen and the rest of the Belles, and Isabella and Jack and Claris and even Star Hannes if you figured she really just wanted to do what she thought was right, twisted as it was. And they wanted to show off Middelburg as a town that supported families. "They won't really shut him down," I said. Then I remembered Marion's prediction about Star diverting attention from Vance's murder. "They just want the place to look squeaky clean for the big visit from Orion this weekend. And to take people's minds off Vance."

"God, you should have seen his face. Terrified he'd go to jail." Her voice tightened again. "Next time Star Hannes comes in for a color job, I'm tempted to poison her."

"Don't even joke about that," I said. I reminded her that the Belles already planned to be at the council meeting and we could speak up on behalf of D.J. "It'll be fine. No one really wants to look like an ogre and hurt a kid. It's a distraction from the murder."

We hung up as I pulled into a visitor's parking place, leashed Linus, and tramped across campus toward the seminary. The seminary dorm's doors were locked, security tight on this as on all campuses. No getting in without a key code.

No intercom, so I phoned Alec, but it went right to the message. I looked around for someone who might let me in. Nothing. This, I reflected, was exactly why reconciliation among

people had gotten so difficult. We are all so afraid, we build thick walls or electronic super-security systems to keep out anything we don't already know. We never get to meet anyone we don't want to meet, so we never get stretched beyond what we already feel comfortable with.

I circled the dorm looking for another entrance, and suddenly, an enormous burning bush spoke to me. Seriously. The kind of burning bush people use in landscaping. Its leaves had already filled out, and a strong smell of smoke and a man's voice came from behind it.

"No," the bush said, "I'm all set on this end." Pause. "Yes, I've deposited all of it. No, no one knows."

*Alec Manser's voice. Interesting.*

"It's fine. He won't be asking any more questions."

That set my teeth on edge. Could "he" be Vance? Linus started to pull on the leash, so I scooped him up and took a step closer to the bush.

Alec had lowered his voice to practically a whisper. "I don't want to talk about it." He sighed. "Well, the police called me earlier and want to ask me some questions about my shoes." Pause. "I know, I know! I even got the new priest to help." Another sigh. "As soon as I can. Sooner, if I have to." Pause. "Yeah."

*Holy cow.* I didn't like the sound of any of that. I stepped around the bush in time to see Alec putting a cell phone back in his pocket and stomping out a cigarette.

"Oh, shit," he said when he saw me.

"Yes," I said. "The only question is, how deep?"

## Chapter Twenty-four

“It’s not your business, Reverend Lonnie,” he said. “You’ve been great, but this isn’t your business.”

If I hadn’t had a puppy in my arms I might have smacked him. “I don’t know what game you’re playing, but when you convinced me to lie to the police you made it my business.”

His eyes shone. “If I told you why, you’d agree.”

“Then tell me.”

He swallowed and worked his jaw. “I can’t.”

I could hardly believe this tormented creature was the singing boy who’d been dusting the pews. But I knew what it was like to keep a secret because you thought your life as you knew it would end if you told.

“Alec, it might help to tell someone.”

He shrugged, stared at the ground. “Too many people know already.”

“The police told me about the shoes.”

His head shot up, eyes wide. "I didn't kill Vance! Why would I take you back there if I had? Someone used my shoes." Pause. "God!" He pulled a pack of cigarettes from his pocket and fingered it.

I decided to take a shot. "What did Vance know that you wanted kept secret?"

He didn't move, but I saw his muscles tighten and his Adam's apple bob when he swallowed. "There are people I love involved. I can't tell you."

I quivered with sorrow for this young man and his painful secret-keeping. I wondered for a fleeting moment if he were gay, but despite his theatricality, he didn't seem so.

I touched his arm. "I believe you," I said, "but now that the police are talking to you because of the shoes, should we tell them the truth about the day we found the body?"

His eyes searched mine before he shook his head. "Then what would they think? That maybe we did it together? Vance dies so I keep my secret and you make your job easier. Right?"

I hadn't considered that. If the police paid any real attention to me, they'd find out I was gay, partnered, closeted, and if they thought Vance knew that, I'd have a motive just like everyone else. If they investigated me at all, Jamie would kill me.

God, I wished someone had found Vance's notes. My absence from them could clear me.

"Tell me about the money you're depositing," I said. When Alec scowled, I reminded him again I could take it all to the cops. "Remember, you begged me to cover for you. I was traumatized by the body, couldn't think straight. I can make an excuse for my actions. Can you?"

I didn't like threatening him, but I needed more information.

His face tightened. "I have another job, okay? I'm earning my own money." He sighed. "My parents pay for everything. It's their pride and joy to say they manage my investments. If they find out I've been working, they'll want to see pay stubs. My bank deposits will go to their stockbroker. And that money's mine. I

can do with it what I want.”

He shoved away from the wall and stalked toward the door. I trotted alongside him. “And what do you want to do with it?”

No answer.

“Did Vance find out you had a secret job? Did he threaten to tell your parents?”

Alec dug into his jacket pocket and pulled out a lighter. “No. Nothing like that.” He stopped walking long enough to light his smoke. “What’ll I tell the police?”

I thought about my omissions of the last few days. “Don’t lie. But you don’t have to tell them everything. Just answer them. Just help them catch the killer.”

He nodded. “Sorry, Rev. Lon. You’re a good person.” He sucked his cigarette. “Cute dog.”

“Vance’s.” When Alec only nodded I said, “If things change, you can give me a call.”

He stared at Linus. “It’s the right thing, sometimes, to hurt a person you love if someone else needs you more. Right?”

*Whoa!* That caught me off guard. My chest squeezed as I thought somehow, incredibly, my secret had gotten to this young man, that he knew about me, Jamie, how she felt about dogs. But the anxiety stretched across his face showed he was talking about himself.

“That’s not an easy situation,” I said.

Without warning, Alec enveloped me in his long arms, then hurried away, trailing cigarette smoke in the warm May sun.

I drove back down the dune considering what he’d said. Maybe he had a serious girlfriend his parents didn’t know about and he was stashing away a little money for—something. I hoped it wasn’t stupid, dangerous or illegal.

I turned off the dune north toward town. I didn’t think Alec had done anything connected to Vance’s death, so I wasn’t going to quit on him yet. The trouble in this world was that people kept quitting on each other. Companies dumped employees, couples divorced, nations stopped negotiating, churches split. Instead of cooperating, everyone lived in coercion. And coercion bred fear.

And fear made you run out and get weapons, whether nuclear or legal or just gossip. Not how we're supposed to live.

My stomach rumbled, so I called The Windmill Grind to see if Marion had heard about D.J. and could take a break for an early lunch.

"Meet me in Central Park," she said. "Kaylee can handle lunch, and we can chat away from the ears. I'll bring lunch."

"Buttermilk pop?"

"Goodness no, Lon, not for the park! I'm thinking brabantse worstbroodjes en appelmoesdessert."

I laughed. "I heard the word dessert in there somewhere, so I'll trust you."

Today, Marion wore a yellow scarf over a red blouse and blue spandex pants, with navy sandals arched over a four-inch spike. She was not a skinny person, but moved as gracefully on four-inch heels as a ballet dancer. Didn't feel natural to her to wear anything flat, she said. And, in fact, the only time I'd ever seen her trip was when she was wearing soccer cleats.

We found a shady bench in Central Park. Nearby, a crew of gray-shirted utility guys struggled to run a line from the corner power pole to the end of the park where the mobile soundstage would park later this week.

I started in a rush to tell Marion all that had happened at church, with Red, and with Alec, everything except, of course, his presence when I found Vance. I slowed down, though, once she served up lunch on plastic picnic ware, and I had my first bite of pork sausage flavored with clove and nutmeg wrapped in a crust so flaky and light it melted when it touched my tongue. The dessert, still warm, was apples and custard baked over rusks. Too many calories, but luxurious.

"So no one's found Vance's notes?" Marion asked as I licked my plastic bowl.

"No." I sucked the last bits from my spoon. "I'm starting to wonder if they even exist."

"You and Tony Zsoldos both." She told me that Tony, editor of the *Middelburg Review*, had been in The Grind that morning

complaining that neither he nor the cops could find any of Vance's work anywhere. "He's pissed because he lost the sensational story Vance promised him, and Star has threatened him if he makes too much of Vance's death in the paper."

"Maybe Vance just kept it all in his head," I said.

Marion just laughed. "Then Tony's screwed and he doesn't deserve it. He's a good guy. He's even sending Vance's final checks along with the ashes to his family in California." She leaned forward and glanced side to side in exaggerated secrecy. "But I did get a clue. When Tony was talking, Berend Berkoop, who must be nearly one hundred now, said he thought it was a crime Vance got paid just for reading in the library." She leaned even closer. "In the rare books archive. What do you think he was doing there?"

"Middelburg has a rare books archive?" The town didn't have a decent grocery store, for heaven's sake.

Marion bent to feed Linus a bit of bread. "Big CLOSER and Dutch heritage site."

I thought about what Vance might have been doing there. "It's illegal for librarians to reveal what patrons check out."

"Rika VanRenssalaer's husband's brother, Bram, runs the archive. And he's a big, big fan of my griesmeelpudding met bessensap. Semolina pudding with currant sauce," she added seeing my incomprehension. "I'm not sure you'd like it. But I think a little bribery is not out of the question here."

## Chapter Twenty-five

After I crated the sleepy Linus in my office, Marion and I sauntered across the park to the library on the corner of Main and Matthew. We tiptoed through the high rows of books smelling of old paper and disuse. Marion waved at the cluster of old men hunched over the newspapers and led me through the heavy glass doors into the archive.

When Bram VanRenssalaer saw Marion he removed the thick glasses from his nose and unfolded himself from behind his desk—and kept unfolding. I remembered him from my first visit to The Grind. He must've been at least six-ten but barely weighed two hundred pounds. If he turned sideways, he'd disappear. He definitely needed more of Marion's grease-meal pudding, or whatever the heck it was she said he liked.

Their embrace warmed my heart. Her head barely came to his sternum even in those spiky heels of hers, but she outweighed him by a good forty pounds. He wore all blacks and browns in

a neat dull suit. She flowed siren red, sunshine yellow and navy from toe to scrunched hairdo. Marion introduced me then said, "We need information."

He held his hands wide. "That is the one thing I have to offer." He seemed a bit sad as he said it.

"It's amazing what you do," I said. And I meant it. Keeping track of all this stuff.

"Bram, Vance TerMolen was working on something."

He studied both of us. "Yes." He folded himself back behind his desk, his face stricken. We were about to ask for the one bit of information he couldn't give, and it pained him.

"Oh, we know," Marion said. "We wouldn't ever ask you to *tell* us."

"I'd be delighted to help you in some other way." He pointed to a shelf. "The history of Five Points' basketball team?"

Marion sat on his desk. "There is a special collection we'd like to see, yes. That's why we came to you, Bram. No one else in the library, no one else in town, knows as much as you do about the history of Middelburg. It's why Vance came to you in the first place."

I saw the light in his eyes and realized Marion had positioned us to score.

"He was one of the few who appreciated you and your collection," Marion continued.

Bram nodded slowly, fingers pressed against his chin. "No one thinks to ask a librarian much these days, with the Internet and all, and we're sitting on some of the greatest materials. Vance understood that."

"I'd be so grateful," Marion said, running a finger along the top of his desk. "I'd be happy to make you griesmeelpudding in gratitude."

Bram tugged at his chin with unbelievably long white fingers. "Met bessensap?"

Marion nodded. "We're interested in, well, you know. The things that interest us."

She lost me there, but Bram followed.

“Well,” Bram drew the word out, rubbing his chin. “I could never *tell* you what Vance was working on, but I do have a small miscellany that might interest you.” He reached under the desk and pulled out a paper box full of files. “For instance, are you interested in reading on the history of Five Points College? Or perhaps general civic history? Or, as a matter of current events, would you be interested in the history of Orion GameTech?”

My God, he was handing us exactly what Vance had been working on.

“Yes!” I stepped forward, but Marion shot me a look.

“Sounds sort of interesting,” she said.

“If you’d be willing to pay the modest copying fee, I’d be happy to let you have these since, coincidentally to your interests, I already have them prepared.” He dug out two more paper boxes full of files.

“Pay the man,” Marion said. Two twenties and two trips across the park later, we had Vance’s research in the back of my car.

“If we can’t find the man’s notes,” Marion said, wiping sweat from her cheeks, “at least you can retrace his steps, see if you can find the stuff he kept bragging about.”

“Me? Aren’t you going to help me?”

Marion stuck her hands on her hips. “Hon, I got a restaurant to run, two kids and a husband who need me. I got a town council meeting tonight and some damned good griesmeelpudding met bessensap to make. You’re just sitting alone in the woods.”

This was one of the moments I regretted never having told Marion about me and Jamie. Mare knew I had a housemate, sure, but I’d never been explicit. I never really wanted to bring it up with anyone. I just wanted it to be a non-issue. So, like I often did when a conversation turned toward my home life, I changed the subject. “Did you hear about D.J. Brink?” For five minutes we waxed on the complete wackiness of some people’s version of justice.

“Why don’t you go give Star a good talking too about real Christian behavior?” Marion asked.

My shoulders tensed. “Me? No. I’m no good at one-on-one

stuff.” Especially not with crazy women.

Marion wiped her face. “That’s left over from your aunt. You gotta get over that crap.” She slammed my hatchback shut. “Besides, even though your aunt made scenes, she really loved you.”

“Ya think?” I didn’t want to think about Aunt Kate’s screaming fits, tantrums, silent treatments, dares, threats, or public displays of insanity. “I’ll see you tonight.”

I grabbed a few files from the Five Points College box and returned to the parish house. Claris greeted me with the info that Peter, whom I still hadn’t seen, had gone to the Tri-Cities hospital in West Olive for chaplaincy work and wouldn’t be back today. I asked her to try to schedule a meeting for him, myself, Jack and Isabella for midweek. I wanted to get them all in a room for some serious peace talks. I greeted Linus, who just snored at me, then I called Jamie. No answer. No messages for me. Probably she’d gone back to the beach. It was her vacation, after all.

I glanced at the stacks of church records I’d wanted to read this morning, but the files that Bram had copied for Vance pulled at me like a magnet. I’d only brought a few, I reasoned. I could just look at those. I scooped my hair back into a ponytail and set to work.

## Chapter Twenty-six

An hour later, I looked at the ceiling, up being the general direction I spoke to when speaking to God. “Funny,” I said. Middelburg had been ultra-conservative as long as I’d known it, Shore County vying with California’s Orange County as the most conservative, most Republican county in the country. I knew that Dutch settlers escaped religious persecution by coming to the land of the free to start a new home in mid nineteenth century west Michigan. What I didn’t know until now was that the “persecution” they’d fled came at the hands of a government that punished them for restricting the human rights of women and others. The Dutch had come to America to find the freedom to uphold their vision of the pure church. They settled in communities throughout the area—Holland, Zeeland, Vriesland, Drenthe, Borculo, Dorr, Grand Haven and Grand Rapids, establishing churches and Christian schools and every other aspect of society with strong Dutch and Calvinist

influence. Over the years, some members of the church grew more Americanized, and around the turn of the century, the community split into what was now the Reformed Church in America and the Christian Reformed Church—the RCA focused on the importance of unity and embracing American culture, and the CRC interested in religious purity and remaining isolated and true to its roots. Around World War I, when such isolationism seemed anti-patriotic and even the more conservative CRC had warmed to their part in the American whole, another church split occurred. The members of the newly formed Christ the Lord's Own Sainted Elect Reformed Church took over the small community of Middelburg and did their utmost to live lives devoted to the purity of what they saw as the true way for Christians. The other churches, still essentially conservative, had moved on to at least discuss women's ordination and accepting divorce. They'd conducted services in English for decades. But not the CLOSER Church. Women in leadership, out of the question. Divorce legal, but shunned. And the church's hymnals still included the psalms in Dutch without music. None was needed. Everyone knew the tunes.

It reminded me of my own church and the Anglican Communion worldwide in the last ten years—people and groups seceding because they felt the institution had grown too liberal, with too many people invited to share the power, the freedom, the privilege. I always thought the good news of the gospel was exactly that, that everyone was invited to the table, but reading this file just reminded me how even my own fairly liberal church so often failed at radical inclusion.

Of course, that didn't mean Christians have no hearts. Even Middelburg's founders, for instance, had strongly supported abolition, a super-liberal movement in its time. And Five Points College and Seminary, like many others in the Midwest, argued in its earliest days for the freedom of all men as essential. But that was before the Dutch community had splintered and the CLOSER Church had taken over administration of Five Points.

And I knew how Vance's mind worked. He'd have found

a way to hold this wonderful history up as something hurtful to Star, perhaps as proof that her promotion of Middelburg as a historically conservative town was a lie. After all, some conservative Christians of one hundred and fifty years ago used the Bible to promote slavery. The folks of Middelburg had not done this.

That made me think again of Chrysalis, the women's center and its odd place in town history. Made more sense along with the Underground Railroad stuff. Middelburg, before the CLOSER community had settled here, had actually welcomed the marginalized in its past. I bet Vance loved that. Star would split a berry-colored seam if he made it public.

Lunch and intense reading left me thirsty. As I ran water for myself and Linus, I wondered what other surprises waited in the rest of the files. Still, I needed to get back to work on my own job, the rifts in Woman at the Well church. I read some more parish notes, then finished the day reading statements by the good Bishop Tutu on peace and reconciliation.

At home I found a note from Jamie that she'd gone to the beach. It had gotten summer hot this afternoon, so I changed into a suit and headed out after her. She had propped a towel on some sticks for a wind block and lay there slicked with oil in a very skimpy bikini. She grunted at me from behind her shades, and I sat for a while not thinking about anything, just being with her. We went home to shower, and though I tried to entice her into a little "nap" together, she said she had plans to check out the boardwalk shops in Grand Haven. She left only a few minutes before I had to change into my Belles uniform, crate Linus and head back into Middelburg for the town meeting.

The meeting had already started when I arrived, and the town hall meeting room was jammed. The town council sat at a long table on a raised stage at one end. Everyone else sat in folding chairs in precisely spaced rows.

Star Hannes sat at the mayor's right, her perfect hair bobbed to her shoulders, rounded under in a loose curl that looked natural but was anything but. She wore a modest plum suit this evening,

with a white jewel-necked blouse and simple strand of pearls and actually looked rather nice. Not at all like a vicious whacko.

I remembered what Marion had told me about West Michigan nice and shuddered.

I found the Belles easily. Eleven women in yellow soccer tunics sitting in the second row were hard to miss. Colleen and D.J. sat in the middle, and my heart swelled. This was the true West Michigan nice—women who'd grown up together sticking together into middle age to fight for their kids and their community. I wished I had something like this in my life in Chicago.

I slipped into the empty chair next to Marion and waved at the others. "I read some of the files," I whispered. "I think I know part of what Vance had. Something to clip Star's wings."

She nodded as a round, silver-headed man introduced himself as Mayor Sterling Roosevelt. Marion showed me an agenda. "Drains first," she said. "They moved the rec center to near the end. And D.J. last. Maybe hoping everyone will leave."

I believed her after suffering through an hour of unbelievably dull droning non-action. No one mentioned Vance's death. Just drains and tree-trimming and budgets for tulip bulb renewal.

Finally, the mayor announced the recreation center discussion. All twelve of us Well's Belles stood up to go to the floor mike. My part was to address the improved health of the older population, who could more easily play soccer on the smaller, walled indoor fields. Not many people over thirty could play for long on huge outdoor fields, but all ages could play indoors, and year 'round.

We had just begun to file out of our row when Star Hannes interrupted. "I'd like to request a change in agenda order," she said glaring at us. "I propose we next address the issue of the illegal business operating on Oak Avenue." She looked out at the Belles standing in a row. "There's a young child involved with an early bedtime, I'm sure." She smiled her version of sweetly at D.J. "I'm sure his *parents* will want to get him home at a reasonable hour, as it is a school night."

"Bitch," Marion mumbled to me as we sat.

I agreed. Star knew, as did the whole town, that Colleen's husband, Daryl, had been arrested on a drug charge two years ago, jumped bond, and pretty much disappeared. Colleen had divorced him in absentia last year.

The mayor agreed and Star began. "The issue before us concerns the ordinance against running a home business without a permit inside the town limits. Mr. D.J. Brink has been charged with purchasing, repairing and reselling bicycles from his driveway on a regular basis."

I looked at D.J. whose eyes grew large and round under his cowlicked blond hair.

"Before you ask," Marion whispered, "Colleen said he insisted on coming. She didn't want to bring him, but figured he had a right."

The town attorney read the relevant ordinance and clarified that since D.J.'s bikes sat with for sale signs on a regular basis each weekend, it constituted a business, not a garage sale or an occasional item offered up for sale. He reassured everyone that the town's annual spring clean-up garage sale weekend would not be illegal. That got a laugh, and the mayor opened the meeting to the floor for comments.

"Because of the age of the violator," Star said, "I intervened to see that no citations have yet been issued."

"See," I whispered, "it'll be fine. It's all for show."

"It remains for us to resolve," said the mayor, "whether or not a child may continue to run such a business."

Colleen got up first and walked with D.J. to the mike. Everyone was surprised when she pulled it from the stand and, without a word, handed it to him.

D.J. was one of those kids who seemed like a thirty-year-old in a tiny body. Even though I'd only seen him the few times Colleen had visited Chicago, I'd heard about him from Marion over the years. He spoke in complete sentences. Did what he promised. Had a vision for his future.

"I'm D.J.," he began. "I sell the bikes. No one wants them, 'cause they're busted up. But I fix them so they run pretty good

so I can sell them. I sell them for double what I put into them, plus my time."

One or two folks chuckled at that.

"Anyhow, it's not just fun. It's like when you go to work every day. I need the money." He paused and looked up at his mother. Colleen looked calm and brave, but I could see her hand shaking by her side. I didn't know how she was doing it. I'd want to kick someone.

"I'm old enough to play in a travel soccer league this summer," D.J. said, "and the coach of a premiere team in Grand Rapids recruited me." He looked at his shoes. "'Cause I'm a pretty good forward and all." He looked up again. "So Mom said she wasn't sure because it's very expensive. Four thousand dollars, plus gas prices keep going up."

Grumbles from the crowd.

"So I asked if I earned it, could I join, and Mom said yes. And I'm doing pretty good. I have \$2,476.25 from the bikes. And fixing Mr. Sligh's lawnmower, which breaks down on him just about every time he mows." People laughed and D.J. grinned up at his mom. "So, anyhow, if you could please just let me sell bikes until I get enough for soccer, I promise I'll stop and I won't do it again."

He handed the mike back to his mom, but just as she reached to take it, he pulled it back again. "Thank you very much for your time," he said, and headed back to his seat.

The Belles applauded wildly. "God, I love that kid," Marion said, blinking rapidly.

The noise died as Star spoke. "Thank you, D.J., for that moving appeal. Do others wish to speak?"

For a few seconds, no one moved. Then heads turned as Brady Wesselynk approached the microphone.

## Chapter Twenty-seven

“I tell you what,” Brady began with his best down-home smile, “I wish all the young kids these days had the entrepreneurial drive of young Master Brink.” General laughter.

I exhaled another layer of tension. This would work out just fine. Annoying, but fine.

“And, as the women say, it takes a whole village to raise the children.”

Marion and I rolled our eyes at each other.

“So here we are.” Brady swept his hands around the room. “A village gathered to determine how to raise this child. And, as we good people know, a law is a law. My question for you all is this: if we just ignore this law of ours, are we teaching D.J. and every other child in Middelburg that to break the law means nothing?”

A few murmurs and nods among the crowd as the council watched carefully, gauging how their constituents wanted them

to vote.

“As Bible-believing Christians, we bring up our children to respect laws, even when we don’t understand them. Even when they seem silly or arbitrary. The law given by authority must be honored with humility and faith.”

Someone in the back murmured, “Amen.”

Marion gripped my wrist. “Hold me back,” she whispered loudly, “or there will be another murder in Middelburg.”

“Like he really obeys all the Biblical laws,” I said. “Notice how he cuts the hair of his temples.”

“Especially in light of the evil grotesquerie of Vance TerMolen’s heinous murder,” Brady said.

*Evil grotesquerie?* He was really rolling.

“Especially in light of this boil on the face of our town, we want to shore up our commitment to righteousness and faith.” Brady swung his fists in the air. “We are battling for this town, and the battle starts with our children. We cannot condone this law-breaking business, no matter how innocently intended. Innocence does not override the soul’s natural depravity, a depravity we must work to control.”

Brady returned to his seat while I struggled to grasp the whole thing. He’d called a little kid fixing bikes *depraved*. I glanced at D.J. who sat frozen, eyes wide. My stomach lurched.

Star looked smug, and my feet started to jiggle. Had she put Brady up to that? Had they kissed and made up since the spat about the lighting contracts?

“And so, we have heard the Christian perspective on the issue,” Star said, as if there were one Christian view on this or any issue. “Is there anyone else who would like to speak before the council votes?”

The voice inside me screamed *Get up there!* I shifted in my seat.

“No!” whispered Marion. “Star will kill you.”

*No*, I told the voice. I couldn’t. She was crazy. Certifiable. Dangerous. I wanted to run and hide in some alley.

*You’ll let Brady be the only voice of faith?* the voice asked.

I looked down the row of Belles, most of whom now looked at me. Marion and Colleen, Julie who talked nonstop about her birdfeeders but who painted Christmas cards and sold them for charity, Bets who e-mailed me a reminder to go to a bar and drink a beer once a month because she was worried the priesthood would squash me, and Rika and Char and Annika and the rest. My team. They had adopted me when I was an outsider summer kid living with the local crazy lady. I wasn't alone here.

"If there's no one else—" Star began and I stood, glancing at my watch. 8:17.

"Great goddess," moaned Marion as I passed her.

I made a mental note to remind Marion that her prayer was less than comforting.

"Reverend Squires." Star's face looked pinched.

"I'd like to offer another *Christian* perspective," I said. I heard a stifled hoot that I knew belonged to Marion. My mind raced. "I could begin by asking Brady whether or not he cuts the hair on his temples. Or gives all his money to the poor. Or eats pork. Or condones the stoning to death of adulterers." Silence. "These are all laws stated in the Bible." Silence again. I smiled. "I, for one, enjoy a hefty rack of ribs out at the Roadhouse now and again, and I daresay Pastor Wesselynk does too."

A few chuckles. Good.

"So, we have to be very careful when we talk about the Bible and law. Followers of Jesus," I said, "work to keep in sight the things He had in His sights. Just two things." I raised one finger. "Love God." I raised a second finger. "Love your neighbor as yourself. Is stopping this boy from earning the money to play soccer an act of love?"

"True love is tough love," Brady shouted from behind me. "God is a just God, and so must we be as parents. Love isn't always pleasant. Love teaches obedience."

"If you love the law, perhaps," I said. "But I'm talking about the law of love."

"You'll forgive me," Star interjected. "How can you talk about loving neighbors when you are at the center of the things

threatening to ruin your neighbors' futures?"

People murmured around me, turned to look. My throat burned. "I beg your pardon?"

Star raised a hand to point at me like some accusing ghost. "The collapse of one of our town's historic churches. The murder of Vance TerMolen. You are linked to both these events, Reverend Squires, are you not?"

Marion burying her head in her hands was the last thing I saw clearly before my urge to run and hide consumed me. I knew I was bouncing on my toes like a little kid, but I couldn't stop myself.

"I believe I'm here because God, the universe, fate, whatever you want to call it, has brought me here to help my neighbors."

"Listen to her," Brady shouted again, "she doesn't even believe in God!"

My face burned and my ears buzzed. "I am not going to walk away." I zeroed in on Star like a ball sitting in an empty corner of the field. "I am not turning my back on that call."

"Even though you turned your back on Vance TerMolen?" Star said, leaning her elbows on the table. "Ignoring repeated calls from him on the very day of his death?"

How the hell did she know that?

"And can you explain to us how lying to the police shows how much you love God?"

My insides squeezed tight. *Look normal*, I thought, and shifted to one hip, trying to relax. Had she found out about me and Jamie? If she had, would she say so here? Out me in front of the whole town?

"You did break into Vance's house after the murder, didn't you?" Star continued.

People mumbled, but I almost collapsed with relief. This wasn't about Jamie.

"And there's certainly no doubt," she said, "that his death will help you reconcile the parish of Woman at the Well church, is there?"

I didn't know how this had become about me and Vance, but

it was time to get the hell out of there.

“Convenient, his death. For you.” Star was rolling now. “But it will not help us impress Christopher Orion when he arrives in a mere four days! Given your questionable moral track record, why should we value your opinion on how to handle this delinquent child?”

A weight sank in my chest, unbelief mixed with such sorrow I thought I might cry. I hadn’t believed it, hadn’t believed civic leaders would do this to a kid. But now I saw it differently, a wicked force that would mow down anything, eight-year-old boys, visiting priests, anything. Even Aunt Kate hadn’t been bent on this kind of destruction.

And what this woman had said might just ruin my chances of getting that rectorship at St. Greg’s no matter how I did with the Woman at the Well parish. This kind of public argument made any hiring committee nervous.

I wanted to cry. I glanced at Marion, Colleen and D.J., who looked aghast as I crashed and burned. That poor kid.

Then something perked up in me. If I was going down, I was going down with a good swift kick to somebody’s shins. I swallowed and leaned toward the mike, unsure what would come out of my mouth. “Vance’s death serves your efforts more than it serves mine, Councilwoman. Gone, he can never share the riches of his last project—an uncensored history of this town and its people.”

More people chatted and shifted.

“That,” I said, “would do more damage to your plan for wooing Orion than a split in one of the nearly two dozen churches in town. Nice try to divert everyone’s attention,” I said, “but it won’t work. Vance’s work can be replicated, you know.”

I felt all the eyes in the place on me as I returned to my seat wondering what in the hell I’d just done. The Belles slapped me as I scooted down the row.

“Kick ass!” Marion whispered. “I didn’t know you had it in you. That’s doing life like you play soccer. With balls. So to speak.”

“I think I’m going to throw up.” My hands shook.

In the end, my speech didn’t help anyone, because the council voted D.J. out of business, then in light of that heated debate, tabled the discussion of the rec center for another month. As we walked out of the building, I felt the crowd parting around me, people whispering and staring.

Marion grabbed my elbow. “Come on, we’re going to get toasted, and you are coming with us.” I followed the line of taillights with just one thought in mind: if Star Hannes could do that to D.J. Brink and to me in public, she could easily have killed Vance in secret. And so help me, it would give me tremendous pleasure to prove it.

## Chapter Twenty-eight

At Skinny's the Belles worked hard to help me feel better about the scene I created. I don't think my mug ever got less than three quarters empty. Even Colleen seemed more worried about me than about D.J., though she left early for home.

Romee Vrooman, Welles Belles keeper and captain, called us all to attention. "Belles, we gotta send that kid to soccer camp." Everyone emptied wallets, but we came up with only three hundred dollars and an agreement to figure out how to do more.

While the girls tossed out money-making ideas, Marion shoved my glass toward me. "I gotta stop," I said. "The pup's crated." *And I need to beat Jamie home. Or else there'll be hell to pay all over again.*

"I think I screwed up, Mare." I traced my index finger through the condensation on the glass. "I should've listened to you and stayed out of it."

"Maybe," Marion said. "But I should've known you'd go right ahead and do what you pleased. I could've been more help."

"You got us into the library, warned me about the *nice* thing." I sipped the beer. "Man, Star's a walking example of that theory."

"She'll make a hell of a congresswoman," Char called out. "Spare us all!"

"Maybe we should flee the state now," Marion said.

They laughed.

"No," I said. "You gotta stick it out. How will this place get any better if you all leave?" It's exactly what I wanted to tell Jack and Isabella when I next had them in a room together. If they left the congregation, nothing would change at The Well.

Marion poured herself another glass and tapped mine, which was still full. "You seriously need to get over your thing about separation, Lonnie. Some relationships are meant to end." She leaned closer. "Some aren't good for the people involved."

I could tell from the look in her eyes she didn't mean living here or the parish split. She meant me. Somehow, she knew about Jamie.

God, what a sucky night. How was I going to do any good here? It wouldn't all just turn out okay because I wanted it to. I gulped half a glass of beer.

Marion suddenly sat back hard in her chair, looking behind me.

"Reverend Squires deserves a medal of valor for her actions tonight," came Brady Wesselyn's voice.

I twisted in my chair. "You know what? I don't want to see you right now."

A chorus of "yeah!" and "am-scray" came from some of the others. Brady just swung a chair up next to mine, turned it backward and straddled it. "I won't stay long," he said, glancing around. "Not my kind of place."

"Thank God," I mumbled.

"I came to tell you that I didn't know what Star had planned," he said, eyes wide and shiny. "I knew about the child, of course, but I had no idea she wanted to attack you."

“What a *nice* thing to say,” Marion said, poking me in the ribs.

“Yeah, nice,” I said. “But do you think anything you can say now matters?” I wanted him to sit in the chair right and close his crotch.

“Maybe.” Brady leaned close to me. “Can we talk outside alone, for just a minute? I got a few things I’d sure like to share.”

“No.” I quaffed a few swallows of beer.

“I figured out what Vance TerMolen knew about Star,” Brady said. “And it makes other things even stranger. Please. I got used tonight, same as you.”

I considered a second then shoved my chair back. “Rescue me in five minutes,” I told Marion, then strutted to the door. Brady could talk to me on the street, in full view of whatever town folks were still out and about. He followed.

Outside, the sidewalk tilted a bit, so I leaned against the brick wall of Skinny’s. “For the record,” I began, “you did not get used same as me tonight. You said your piece, ridiculous as it was. I got cut up and hung to dry.”

Brady nodded. “Okay. But it wasn’t my doing.”

I didn’t want a truce. “If you hadn’t said such stupid stuff as the voice of all Christians, I wouldn’t have had to get up to speak for the sensible compassionate ones.”

Brady sighed. “Do your friends think I was part of that scheme?”

I nodded. “Yep.”

“Well, that pains me.” He leaned on the brick next to me. “Reverend Squires, I think Star Hannes has gone and lost her sense of perspective. Orion GameTech is so important to her, she seems to think any means will justify landing them, and then folks’ll just hand her the congressional seat on a platter.”

I watched a lone sedan chug by. No other lights brightened the night, just its headlights and Skinny’s red neon. “You think she’d kill for it?”

Brady shoved off from the wall. “What? No! I mean, no, I’m

certainly not accusing Star of—”

I waved my hand to shut him up. “Relax. I just wondered what you thought. Now tell me why you hauled me out here.” I wanted to go back inside and sit and finish my beer.

“Normally, I avoid gossip,” Brady began, wiping his hair back from his temples. “I’ve kept quiet on this because it seemed the right thing. But since Vance’s death, I’ve fussed about it.” He swung. “Not because I think Star had anything to do with it, but...well...”

“But you think Star had something to do with it.”

He paced. “Several weeks ago, I saw Star and a man, cozy in her car in an unpopulated area outside of town. I, uh, recognized her BMW sedan as I happened by, checking out a biking route I wanted to try. I like to drive them first, make sure the shoulders aren’t too dangerous.”

“What was she doing with this man?”

“I pulled over, of course, because it seemed just wrong that she’d be sitting alone in a small dirt lot at the Hickory Trailhead. But before I turned in, I saw two heads rise together, through the back window.” He paced again, smoothed his hair again. “Caught me off guard, and I left quick. I don’t think either of them saw me.”

I couldn’t quite see Star Hannes getting it on with some guy in the backseat of her Beemer, but stranger things have happened. “You know the guy?”

“Yes. Married. And a surprise, because he didn’t seem quite her type. It was...” He looked at me. “I suppose I can trust you to handle this with some tact?”

He questioned my ethics? I bit my tongue, but he read it on my face.

“It was Ivor Koontz,” he said. “Husband of your parishioner, Isabella.”

## Chapter Twenty-nine

Now that *was* a surprise. I hadn't met the guy, but I couldn't see Star involved with any tradesman who hit his wife. "You sure?"

Brady nodded. "I saw them again. Two weeks later. Same time, same day, same place. I, uh, happened to drive by again."

"Checking on them?" I laughed. "Well, I can't say as I blame you." I yawned and stretched, feeling the brick scratch my back through my sweatshirt. Then, the importance of that name hit me. Ivor Koontz. Mr. Electrical Contractor. After the rec center contract. Not on the Celebration plan. "So, then why didn't he get the stage lighting job?"

Brady stopped. "That's what's bothering me, even more than their affair." He swiped his temples again. "If she's sweet on him, then I'd understand why she'd yank the job from me, even if it was wrong headed, but why would she give it to Jack Putnam?"

"You suppose Koontz was okay with that?"

Brady shrugged. "How could he be? It seems just crazy."

"Maybe they had a squabble."

"Well, that plus tonight makes me think she's a danger to the town." He raised a finger quickly. "Not the shovel-wielding kind. But not thinking clearly. Maybe not the best person to be running things when Orion comes."

"And you are?" I asked. "Because if that's where you're headed, I'll warn you right now you can't have my vote."

"Orion is a church man," Brady said, "and I do lead the largest church in the area."

"Did it occur to you that maybe she gave the contract to Jack just to put you in your place? Just to stomp a little humility back into you?"

Brady blinked, truly stymied. "I don't see—"

I pulled the bar door open. "Of course not. I'm going back to my friends. And don't think you scraped the crap off your conscience here. I'm still gonna have to face the fallout in the morning, while you'll be biking in the country."

I reentered the bar and let the door slam on his explanation of his biking schedule. Thank God he didn't follow me back in.

Before long, I drove home, which later I realized I shouldn't have. I'd had way too much to drink, and though those country roads don't have much traffic, they've got turkeys and deer and skunks and ten-foot-deep ditches filled with water on either side and the occasional car doing seventy who forgets to click off his brights as he barrels toward you. But I got home, played with Linus, took him out and dropped into bed in my uniform. Jamie's screams of anger—"Get out of that bed you smell like smoke for God's sake Jesus Lonnie you can be such a pig"—woke me up long enough to strip, brush my teeth and sleep like the dead until morning.

Tuesday morning went pretty much the same except I ate two bowls of Cap'n Crunch hoping the sugar would do something for my headache. I left Jamie a note suggesting we have dinner and the evening together at home. I'd pick up stuff to cook later. I hoped she'd go for it instead of another night on the town

with people she'd just met. I hoped she wouldn't hear about the council meeting until I had a chance to tell her a watered-down version.

At the parish house, Claris greeted me and Linus with a soft-eyed look that told me she'd already heard about it. "Peter want to see me?" I asked, half-expecting a yes, but she shook her head.

"Deanery Bible study much of the day," she said. "In Borculo. He'll see the bishop there and update him on your progress, I'm sure."

I should have called the bishop early so he'd at least have heard it all from me first. What with Alec and the library and the meeting, I'd forgotten. I grabbed a cup of coffee from the pot. "Do you think there's time on his calendar to meet with me, Jack and Isabella tomorrow?"

She promised to look and let me know, which I knew was her polite way of saying she'd have to check with him first to see if he wanted to talk to us. Claris was the nicest gatekeeper I'd ever met. Every priest should have one.

I thought a bit about what Brady had told me and kept coming back to the utter weirdness of Star hiring Jack Putnam to do lights and sound for an event as crucial to her as Middelburg's Family Values Celebration. I didn't want to talk to her, and I was a little afraid of Ivor Koontz, so I decided to ask Jack. He agreed to meet me for coffee at the town beach on his lunch hour.

Middelburg's beach might be enough to convince this Orion guy to relocate here, I thought as I walked across the huge, mostly empty parking lot. Downtown shops clustered right up to where Main Street ended at Lake Shore Drive, which ran north and south more or less along the water. But here stretched a wide, flat strip of sugar white sand. Dunes rose to the north and south, fuzzy with grass then scrub, then forest, but here, for about a quarter mile, the shore was flat and perfect. The township beach up by my cottage was much smaller, more private. This public playground included volleyball pits, flush toilets and a snack stand. Across the street, Ventura's Mexican Restaurante, Sandee's

Pizza and Pauline's Donut Den offered more. A boardwalk picked up where the sidewalk left off, and as long as I stayed off the sand I could walk Linus with me along the beach. I spotted Jack crossing the street, two Breezin' Brew coffee cups in his hands.

"Skinny iced latte," he said handing me a cold cup. "I wagered on leaded, no whip."

"Perfect," I said, though I'd have gone with the whipped cream given how crappy I felt today. But Jack's vibe made me smile. The breeze wrapped his khakis around knobby knees, and knobby arms stuck out of a purple polo shirt. His ponytail popped through the back of his Middelburg School Crusaders ball hat.

"How you been?" he asked.

"Were you at the council meeting last night?" The coffee's cold bit against my tongue.

"Yep." Jack slurped on his straw. "Went to support D.J. Later, I felt like it was your pieces I might have to pick up."

"Yeah." I wished I could see his eyes behind his sunglasses. "So what did you think of your business partner's attack on me?"

He chuckled. "Don't displace your anger at Star onto me."

"Why not? You signed on to work with her for the Family Values Celebration. The very thing your former partner, Vance, worked against."

I could tell by the tip of his head he was studying me. "Baiting me isn't going to derail me, Reverend. My work with Star is just business. I don't have to like her to do a good job and earn a good salary." He chuckled again. "Where would we be if we only worked for people we liked?"

I thought of Bishop Tappen and had to agree. "Fair enough. Still, Jack, why'd she give you the contract instead of Brady? Or Ivor Koontz?"

"Maybe she thinks I'm the best man for the job?"

That didn't seem likely to me. I mean, maybe Jack did fine work, but Brady and Ivor had proven themselves professionally for years. And they were her allies. "How'd she know that if this is your first commercial job?"

"I've worked in homes. People she knows." His step

quicken.

"Does this mean you're wavering on the split?" With Vance gone and Jack wishy-washy, my prospects for uniting the congregation would be better.

Jack shrugged. "I don't know. I want to live in peace with all people. That includes Star. I don't like Father Peter's sermons or the close-fisted way he runs that church. We need more parishioner involvement in decision-making. Just that would help a lot. But he won't budge."

I couldn't image that. If I ran a church, I'd have volunteers involved in practically every decision. After all, it was their church and the rector worked for them.

"And I've heard from a few others in town, not even Episcopalians, that if we started a more open worship space, they'd come. They've kind of had it too, and don't like driving all the way to Holland or Grand Rapids. There's a need." He half-smiled at me. "Sorry. I know it's your job to stop the split."

"It's okay. I just want to get a handle on the complete situation."

"But look, that's not what I wanted to talk to you about. I understand Alec Manser played a role in you finding Vance's body."

I reminded myself how much I'd told. "Yeah, gave me a key."

"The boy must trust you then, even though you just met?"

*Not really*, I thought, remembering how little he'd told me. "It was just a key to an empty house. He thought."

"He's working for The Well, right, as some sort of intern?"

Good Lord, I wished the guy would get to his point. "Uh-huh. He's due in later this afternoon in fact. Mopping cobwebs out of the rafters, I think." Claris had told me that earlier, since neither she nor Peter nor any of the vestry nor the sexton felt able to climb a ladder to the required height.

"Well, I've thought a lot about Vance's project, you know, his boasts about knowing secrets on virtually everyone. About publishing them. About how that's probably what got him killed."

He paused, waiting for me again.

“Yeah.”

“Alec Manser has one hell of a secret, Lonnie. A secret Vance knew.”

I stopped. “How do you know?”

“Because Isabella told me and Vance when she found out near the start of summer. I didn’t think Alec knew that we knew. But maybe Vance told him he knew. Or maybe he told him we all knew.”

Suddenly, I got it. Jack feared that Alec Manser had killed Vance to protect some secret and might come after him next. “Do you really think Alec’s a killer?”

“Everyone will kill to protect what they love, Lonnie. Everyone.”

## Chapter Thirty

“He’s got a secret relationship then?” I guessed. “One his parents don’t know about and he wants to keep it that way.”

Jack started, surprised. Score one for me. “Did he tell you? Did Isabella? Vance?”

“He hinted,” I said.

Jack nodded. “He does trust you then.”

“So how did Isabella find out? Does Alec trust her?”

“God, no. Total fluke. Isabella saw them in Chicago, where the girl lives. Alec goes there on the sly during the week, I guess.”

I wondered if that had to do with why he was catching up on work on a Saturday. “Did she confront them?”

“Says not. Says she managed to watch at one point as the girl signed a credit card receipt using Alec’s last name. Both wore rings.”

“You think they’re *married*?” Holy cow, this was one hell of a secret. “You think Alec Manser is married and hasn’t told his

parents?”

“Isabella seemed convinced.” Jack sucked on a piece of ice.

“Why marry and not tell?”

Jack crunched the ice and swallowed it. “The Mansers hold the checkbook pretty tight. Maybe they’d cut the boy off if he messed up?” He jiggled his cup to slurp another cube.

“So, you think Vance talked to Alec about it.”

“It would be just like him to say, ‘Hey, congrats on the wedding. Can’t wait to ask your mom all about it.’”

This explained Alec’s aversion to any investigation into his life. “God. Do you think Vance would have exposed that poor kid?”

Jack considered, sucking more ice. “Maybe. But not to hurt the kid. The kid would’ve been a tool.”

“How so?”

“Same reason Isabella told us. She and Vance hate Star Hannes, and the men and women in this town like her, always pretending to piety and perfection. They loved having proof that at least two of those so-perfect families hadn’t raised perfect honest children. That’s exactly the sort of thing Vance wanted to publish. I don’t think he’d have let Alec’s well-being stop him from trashing the parents.”

“Two families?” I watched a batch of teenage boys and girls flailing in waist-deep water after a mis-tossed Frisbee. They must be frozen numb. “The girl’s keeping it a secret too?”

Jack’s stride quickened. “My God, yes. Alec’s parents might cut him off, but they’d survive. Ruth’s parents would simply die and she knows it.”

I’d heard that name before but couldn’t place the face. Not related to one of the Belles.

“Ruth who?”

He shook his head. “They’re both good kids trying to live their own lives.”

I stopped. “You think Alec’s a good kid even if he might have killed Vance?”

Jack eyed the end of the boardwalk then turned back. “Sure.

Like I said.”

“Well, what about you?” I asked. “If Vance uncovered something about your mysterious electrical contract with Star, you might have killed him.” I lobbed it just to see what would happen.

Nothing. No reaction. “Yeah, sure, but he didn’t. There’s nothing there, really. Star called, I figured I could do it, and I’m happy for the money. Probably she’s up to some sort of manipulation of Brady or Ivor or both, but if it works to my advantage, I don’t care.” He grinned, raising his glasses so I could see his eyes. “Hell, someone ought to benefit from that woman’s insanity, right? I mean, I guess we’re all a little crazy now and again.”

As we returned to the street, I considered Jack’s philosophy. Everyone was crazy, everyone could kill, but even the crazed and the murderous had goodness in them. And hey, when your enemy offers you a gift, you don’t assume it’s a Trojan Horse, but take it in good faith. What a relaxed approach to life.

“You be careful,” Jack said as I headed back to town. “Thanks to Star’s little show last night, a whole lot more people are mad at you today than yesterday.”

With that nice thought, I debated whether to wander into The Windmill Grind or back to church. When I peeked in, The Grind looked packed, with nearly a dozen customers in line. No way Marion could chat. I’d go get some more work done and stop by here a little later.

Claris stood collecting things into her purse when I entered. “Just heading out to lunch,” she said. “Want me to grab you a sandwich?” I declined and she gazed down at Linus. “He seems a nice enough dog.”

I realized I’d never seen her pet him and wondered if she were afraid. “He’s quite friendly.”

“I grew up with dogs, hunting dogs. Wild really. Never in the house.” She patted imaginary stray strands of hair back into place. “Peter can’t abide them, so we never had them in the house. Except for a few days, one pup the kids found near the

creek back of the house. Petie tried hard to convince his father, but we couldn't keep it, of course. And Petie felt so bad when we got rid of it, because his sister cried for a week. So he never tried that again." She smiled and picked up her purse. "Petie never could stand to see Ruthie cry."

I stared at Claris remembering something Brady had said to Peter. The McGavins had a daughter named Ruth.

And Jack had said Isabella thought Alec was married to a girl named Ruth.

Had Alec Manser secretly married Ruth McGavin without their parents' knowledge?

I waved Claris off to lunch then called Alec. "I want to talk about Ruth," I said. "You choose if it's in person or on the phone."

Alec showed up about fifteen minutes later in a Five Points T-shirt with cut-off sleeves and baggy athletic shorts and flip-flops. His face wasn't nearly as casual. "I gotta polish the baptismal font," he said without a greeting.

I followed him into the sanctuary. "At least now I understand why you don't want the cops asking questions about your whereabouts," I said. "You're trying to keep anyone from figuring out you have a wife in another city. Maybe I could help. I could talk to the investigating officers. But you have to tell me everything."

Alec rubbed tung oil onto the wooden font. "My parents think I'm going to start seminary, this fall, okay? It's why I'm working here. Plus, I promised Ruth I'd keep an eye out and make sure her parents are okay, given the church split and all."

"So you aren't going to seminary?"

"No. Maybe that makes me a bad son. Maybe I should do just what they tell me. Honor thy father and mother." The pain in his eyes pulled at my heart. "But no."

"You have to leave them sometime," I said. "Your life is yours. It's not okay for them to control you. You're twenty-some years old."

"Plus, we need money. Ruth's pregnant."

I sat down on the altar stairs. "Congratulations! Is she getting medical care?"

He nodded, rubbing harder now. The jungle scent of the oil filled our corner of the cool church. "She doesn't get paid much, but she's got benefits. She designs wrappers for kids' candy."

"That sounds like a cool job."

Alec glanced at me as if to see if I were serious. "You know the bubble gum bits that look like kitty litter? She did that. And the chocolate worms? And the giant raspberry sucker with bits of gum that's supposed to look like a piece of meat filled with maggots? She did that too."

*Whoa.* "Kids love anything that freaks adults out," I said.

Alec nodded. "It freaks her parents out. They think she's a loser. Her dad told her that when she got her eyebrow pierced."

"I'm sure he didn't mean it," I lied.

"Whatever." He rubbed a relief carving of a cherub face.

"So, uh, regarding the need for money?" People killed other people for smaller reasons than taking care of wives and children-to-be. "You didn't do anything, uh..."

"I didn't kill Vance, if that's what you mean." He looked at me. "This isn't *The Sopranos*!"

I laughed. "No mafia here in Middelburg, huh?"

"I didn't say that. I just said I didn't kill Vance for money. Ruth and I have the money thing worked out." He rubbed.

"How?"

He tossed the cloth over his shoulder and slumped. "Okay, but nobody knows this. Not even Vance. I tell my parents I'm shopping in Chicago, but really, I spend the whole time with Ruth." He sighed. "My parents would flip if they knew I had a girl, but it's okay if I'm shopping. Go figure. Anyhow, during the week, Ruth buys me clothes and stuff. Just pays cash. And then she and I can spend my visits together. I come home with a lot of new clothes to show my parents. They give me a check to cover the receipts." His glance showed a flicker of triumph mixed with pain. "Then the next visit, I return everything and get the money back. We've banked almost all of it. For the baby."

“Your parents never wonder why they don’t see you in the new clothes?”

He shrugged. “I keep a piece or two. They don’t see me that much. Plus, really neither one keeps track.”

“Seems like a lot of work.”

“You ever have something you seriously want kept secret?” he asked.

I thought of Jamie. “Yes. And you’re right, it takes a lot of work, but it’s worth it.”

He picked up his rag, oiled it and began to rub. The olive wood gleamed in the colored light of the windows.

“You could talk to the police,” I said. “Show them you didn’t kill Vance for money—”

“Or to keep my marriage quiet. Or for any other reason.”

Something about the way he said it. “You had another reason?”

His shoulders hunched.

“Dude,” I said, “you *so* owe me. Start talking or I’m calling the cops right now.”

He sighed. “I overheard my mom telling Vance something about Councilwoman Hannes and Mr. Koontz. Like they were having an affair.”

## Chapter Thirty-one

“Hold on, hold on.” I rubbed my face. “Are you telling me your mother gave up dirt on her buddy Star *to Vance*?” I believed this about as much as I believed I still had Olympic soccer in my future. “Come on!”

He nodded. “Honest.”

“Why the hell would she do that?” I asked myself as much as Alec. I walked through it again. Brady told me he’d seen Star and Ivor in a clinch in a car at some deserted parking lot. Had Mimi seen something similar? Or had Star confessed to her? Somehow, Mimi had found out, and she told Vance.

“Why?” I asked. “Do you suppose he had something on her and traded her his silence about her secret if she spilled about Star?”

“He did his own spying on Mrs. Hannes,” Alec said. “He didn’t need my mom for that.”

I bent around the front so I could see his face as he worked.

“Meaning what?”

Alec rubbed faster. “Just so you know, Mrs. Hannes treats my mom like crap. And my dad isn’t much better. Mom’s got money, yeah, but not much love. I don’t know if anyone loves her, really, except me. And I have to lie to her because she’s so goddamned wrapped up in the games this town plays.” He blinked hard. “Sorry about swearing.”

“It’s okay,” I said.

“Friday morning, Mom gave Vance her key to Mrs. Hannes’s office. I saw her do it. Just for one night, she said.”

I hadn’t heard anything about the cops finding a key to Star’s office in Vance’s stuff. “Where is it now?”

His dark eyes smoldered. “I took it off him, when we found him. It was in his pants pocket.”

Holy cow! I remembered the way he’d apparently freaked out, touching the body. He’d completely faked me out as he searched for the key. “Does your mother know?”

He shook his head. “No. You think I should tell her? She’ll know we lied, that I was there.”

I had so much going through my head, I couldn’t answer. “How did you know he had her key?”

Alec’s biceps bulged as he worked. “Well, I knew my mom hadn’t gotten it back because she hung around the house Saturday until she went shopping with Mrs. Hannes and Mrs. McGavin in Grand Rapids. He didn’t come by or anything.”

“Why in heaven’s name did she give it to him in the first place?” I thought about his description of his mother as living without love. I remembered the Dope on dope and the gaggle of girls who loved his bad-boy image.

*Oh my God. They were having an affair.* Vance TerMolen was sleeping with the right-hand woman of his archenemy and nobody knew. Except Alec.

I felt like I’d stumbled into an episode of *Beverly Hills 90210*.

My face must’ve shown my train of thought, because Alec responded to it. “I’m pretty sure, yeah.”

“How did you—”

“I watch my mom, you know? About a year ago, when Ruth and I decided to get married, no matter what, I noticed my mom acting like...well, like Ruth. I’d never seen that before. Ruth said, dummy, she’s in love. I knew it wasn’t with my dad. So, I checked it out, you know? Just started watching. My mom’s so used to getting ignored, she didn’t really hide it.”

So Vance had gotten into Star’s office. That’s probably where he got the file with the rec center info and stage drawings I’d seen on his table. But what else had he gotten?

“You don’t know where Vance kept his notes, do you?”

Alec shook his head. “No. I think my mom wonders that too. I think she’s worried there’s stuff about her in there. About them. She’s scared, I can tell.”

“She might just be scared because she wonders where the key is,” I said. Soon, she’d have to admit it had gone missing.

Alec finished the last angel’s face and slung the rag over his shoulder. “Funny thing. I heard him tell my mom once, in sort of a joke, that he never left home without them. So when I was feeling his body for the key, I felt for a CD or a flash drive or something. The key was easy because my mom keeps it on a golf ball ring. Easy to feel the ball. But I didn’t feel anything else.”

I thought about Vance sliding onto the stool next to me my first morning in town looking like the cat who’d caught the canary. I thought it had been about me. But he’d had that key in his pocket. He’d known he was only hours away from free access to his nemesis’s lair. And if Alec was right, he had his notes with him too. I tried to remember a bag, a bulge, anything shaped like a pad or a laptop or a CD. But I could only remember his bangs, his shiny zippers, and his long fingers rotating that damned knife.

“So, that’s everything, okay?” Alec rose. “Now you see why no cops.”

I did. “What does Ruth think?”

Alec scratched his chin. “Now she wants to tell. I think we shouldn’t yet. I mean, we were going to tell in the fall, when

I don't go to sem anyhow, so why rush? We're sort of fighting about it." He leaned against the font. "Man, this whole thing just sucks."

I leaned against him. "Yes, it does."

We stood that way for a minute or so, a long, comfortable silence. Then I nudged him in the ribs and began to sing the students' anthem from *Les Misérables*, the anthem I'd heard him singing the day we met.

He stood and sang the lines back to me, skipping to the final chorus, spreading his arms wide, raising his voice to the rafters.

I hugged him. "Hang in there. We'll touch base tomorrow, okay?" I left him considering the wooden screen in front of the choir loft, the next item on his polishing list, and returned to my office.

"Is that the lovely Manser boy?" Claris asked. "He has the nicest singing voice."

"Mmm." My mind ripped over everything Alec had just told me like a midfielder following one long kick after another. This woman didn't know her daughter had gotten married and was expecting a baby, and I did. I bounced on my toes. "He is a very nice young man."

"Yes," Claris said, restocking sticky notes in her desktop dispenser.

Something else Alec had mentioned hovered in the back of my head. Star's alibi! I'd almost forgotten, but his story had given Star an alibi for the murder. "So, you and Mimi and Star spent the day at the mall Saturday?" I asked, hoping to sound casual.

"Oh, yes!" Claris shined. "I got the purple flats you admired so much. And these." She thrust a dainty foot so I could see the tropical red flats. "Splashy, don't you think?"

I nodded enthusiastically. "So, is this mall a place where I could spend a day?" Not that I wanted to. "Did you spend the whole day there?"

Claris neatened the pens in her cup. "Oh, we got there about noon, I guess, and stayed until just after four. But we didn't hit half the shops. There's a lot that have clothes that only skinny

kids can wear.” She patted her belly. “Not me.”

I patted mine in return. “Me either.” I wandered up to my office and checked on Linus who barely stirred in his sleep. Puppies had two modes, I was learning: sleep or play. Nothing in between. I’d decided to take advantage of his sleep mode to get a little more work done.

Mostly, though, I sat and thought about how weird it all was. So many secrets boggled my mind. Things look so smooth on the surface, just the way people like it, then along comes someone like Vance, who just has to pry that safety seal off, no matter what it takes—teeth, a knife, a crowbar, a stick of dynamite. No wonder he carried that multi-tool thing with him everywhere. It probably had stuff on it that could open anything.

A big, heavy idea thudded into the center of my stomach. Not an idea, really, a knowing. “Oh, shit,” I said. “Oh shit.” *Help, help, help*, I prayed and grabbed the phone to dial Marion’s number.

She’d gone to break, but I told the kid who answered it was an emergency. Several knee-bouncing seconds passed. “I get one twenty-minute break, Lon,” Marion said. “This had better be good.”

I sucked in a deep breath. “You won’t believe this, but I’ve found Vance TerMolen’s notes.”

## Chapter Thirty-two

“Talk about suspense,” Marion said as we sat down in her family room later that night. We’d pawned Linus off on the boys, and she’d sent Denny, her husband, to the hardware store to entertain himself for an hour. “No interruptions unless there are organs exposed,” she’d told everyone before we locked ourselves in.

It had taken us almost seven hours to maneuver this private time together. She couldn’t escape The Grind, then had to feed her kids. I had to dodge Claris, who suddenly had a million questions about reconciliation in parishes and in personal rites, then found myself in the awkward position of having to ditch Jamie on the just-us-night I had wanted so badly. I couldn’t really explain why, because she would have flipped, so I just claimed Marion had a family emergency.

“Whatever,” she said, grabbing another new magazine and flopping onto the couch in the last rays of the evening sun. “Just

take the dog.”

Marion and I watched the desktop computer whir to life. “You take the pilot’s seat,” Marion said, seating herself on a straight chair next to the desk. Her gauzy purple shirt wafted around her even when she sat still. A huge pewter pendant of a round naked woman with a spiral in her center rested between Marion’s breasts, like the opposite of Bishop Tappen’s big gray cross. “Let’s see what you found.”

Doubts had flooded me since that first certain intuition. If these were Vance’s notes, the ones he said he kept on him all the time, why’d he leave them home that day? I remembered the pile I’d found it in. Perhaps he’d emptied his pockets whenever at home. My dad did that. If so, then whatever took him to the Interfaith Project House must’ve been a surprise and a rush. Did he leave the house forgetting to refill his pockets? What could have made him that excited?

“Jesus, Mary, Joseph and the great goddess Gaia, will you come on!”

I glanced at Marion. On the wall behind her hung an enormous leather and sinew dream catcher decorated with eagle wings. Two African drums stood in the corner. I’ll bet normally it felt peaceful here.

“Maybe we don’t want to open this,” I said, pulling the scrunchie from my ponytail and pulling all my hair back again.

“Oh, honey, you’re opening it. Reading it is another question. I’m not sure how much I want to know about my neighbors’ goings on. Bad karma.” We stared at each other. “Go on.”

I pulled Vance’s pocketknife from my jeans. Of all the notched tools, I now knew which slot would pull up the thing I wanted.

“Who’d believe it?” Marion said, leaning over the knife. “A USB drive as part of a pocketknife. Right along with the screwdriver and nail file and cute little scissors.”

“You’d think it would get wrecked. Wet or something.” I aligned it with the port on her computer tower and shoved it in. “Here we go.”

We watched as the drive opened automatically, displaying a

long list of files and documents.

“Sweet Gaia, blessed mother earth,” Marion whispered.

“Amen.” I scanned the list. Middelburg history, Five Points College and Orion GameTech all had files, of course. And Alec, Ruth, Brady, Star, Jack all had files. All the Belles. Me. Dozens of names I didn’t know.

Marion touched the screen. “Open mine.”

I hesitated over the mouse. “You want to read it privately?”

Her eyes shifted toward me. “Hon, I only got one secret. If it’s there, I’ll tell you. If not, I’ll probably tell you anyway.”

I clicked open the document. We read Marion’s name, brief bio, family info, address, job. Saw a few photos of her. But after that, only two short sentences. One gave the name and address of her drug dealer. The other declared her not a Christian.

“Please tell me you just smoke dope,” I said.

“Just a little and not very often. Vance hooked me up, the scum.” She slumped back in her chair, arms folded. “Ass. Still, I wouldn’t want that made public.”

“So he never told you he had something on you that he’d use? Try to get anything out of you?”

She shook her head. “Must not have had anything he wanted. Damn. I can’t believe he wrote down that I’m not a Christian. He doesn’t know what I am.”

“You don’t know what you are,” I teased.

“Eclectic believer!” She nudged me. “Still, that would ruin me if it got out. Worse than the drugs.”

I closed her file and looked at the list again. I couldn’t take my eyes off my own name. What would I find if I opened it? Was Jamie listed there? Information about our relationship? Did Marion expect me to open mine the way I’d opened hers?

“Let’s erase it,” Marion said.

“I don’t think the name of a dealer will get you into—”

“Not just mine. The whole thing.” She grabbed my arm, shook it lightly. “This is bad energy, Lon. No one should read it. Let’s just erase it all.”

“But it’s evidence! The police—”

"The cops can do without." She tapped the screen. "Most of these are good people, or confused people trying to be good. They don't deserve to have their mistakes, their weaknesses written down. Whether or not anyone reads them, just the writing gives it more power." She shuddered and stood. "It's creeping me out. Erase it."

I considered it, I really did. What might be in my own file? If I hadn't taken the knife from Vance's house by accident, the cops would have found this information days ago, might even have publicized it. Of course, they might already have captured the murderer too. "Don't you think I've hurt the investigation enough? I probably should call Red Carson right now."

"No." Marion strode back to the desk. "No, Lonnie. Everything happens the way it is supposed to. The universe brought you here because the cops weren't supposed to have the information. You need to look into your heart for guidance. What are you supposed to do?"

I glanced from her to the dream catcher, letting my focus go in the intricate weave of sinew. *What if I turn the notes over to the police?* I waited for an answer, but none came. Only a hard knot formed and pressed against my sternum. *Should I put it away, maybe even throw it away?* I waited and my skin began to itch, but again, no answering voice. *Okay. Should I read it and then decide?* After all, if I read it, I wouldn't have to tell anybody anything. No reply. I wondered how much legal trouble I'd be in if any of this ever got out.

"Lonnie. Don't."

I thought about the amazing set of circumstances that had brought me to this place, given me this task in the parish, this chance to get the job at home that I'd wanted for so long. What could I do now to honor the chance I'd been given?

I thought of one of my favorite lines from a psalm, one I'd used on Little Lambs toddlers more than once. "Do not be like a horse or mule, which have no understanding." It always made the kids giggle then run around pretending to be mules, which distracted them from whatever unpleasantness had been going

on. And Claris had quoted that psalm too, when I'd first arrived. It was a psalm about guilt becoming known and forgiven, about receiving guidance to a better life.

"I'm reading it," I said. "I have to."

Marion sighed. "Of course you do. Fine. But I don't want to know, okay? I gotta live with these people."

## Chapter Thirty-three

A few hours later I sat back and rubbed my eyes, too tired to finish. The coffee Marion had brought me an hour ago didn't taste good anymore. I wondered if anything would.

If the secrets kept by the residents of any neighborhood or town got listed all in one place, would it look like this one? Alternately funny, sad and scary, this list drew me on, one item to the next, like a multi-car crash during a race. Each new bit changed the picture of Middelburg as a whole. A still in the back of an abandoned barn. Families hurtled toward bankruptcy even as they built new mansions on the lakeshore. Poaching. A wealthy family with huge amounts of money offshore for reasons Vance hadn't figured out. Prescription drug abuse. Drug dealing. Gun deals. Sexual habits I didn't want to think about. A lot of it I already knew. Ivor Koontz beat his wife. Alec Manser and Ruth McGavin were married. Star had dumped Brady from the lighting contract and given it to Jack Putnam. Vance even had a

note that Mimi Manser was involved in a long-term affair, but the scum didn't list himself as the other man.

I'd promised myself early on that if I saw even one crime against a child I was calling Red immediately, but I didn't.

There were files full of scanned articles and downloaded Web pages on Orion GameTech, Five Points College, the proposed rec center, the women's shelter and many other bits of civic business. Many of the individual files had articles and photos and even some résumés—things he'd clearly gotten from the Internet or newspapers. Thank God nothing looked like he'd actually been spying on people.

A few things grabbed me. Financial spreadsheets from Frontline Church of Christ. I didn't spend a lot of time with them, but a first glance showed that Brady Wesselynk had one hell of an "evangelism" budget which he maxed out every quarter. Vance had noted it in red. I wondered how he'd gotten his hands on those and what Brady did with all that cash.

Isabella's file included several articles on battered women, safe space shelters, ways to raise kids to break the cycle of violence. None of them mentioned Isabella, of course. Could it be that Vance collected them to share with her at some point? Was he planning on doing some good with any of this?

Jack Putnam's file showed he'd gotten arrested once, while in college, for underage drinking. That was it, other than a note from Vance wondering if he were gay.

Red Carson had a file, and I laughed to discover she used the same dope provider as Marion. In fact, so did a half dozen other folks on Vance's list. I wondered if he got a cut for connecting them all. Other than that, he noted Red's devotion to fixing up a 1960s Ford kept at the garage. Pretty dull stuff.

Star's file had yet another version of the stage schematics I'd seen earlier. This was a jpg, a photo that Vance had taken of a document somewhere. It had a variety of red and blue penciled markings all over it. I couldn't make head nor tail of it, so I printed it off to show to Jack later.

In fact, I printed off all the files I didn't get through—nothing

on people, but everything on the civic stuff and businesses. I could read it at home later.

My own file had surprised me. He'd found my résumé on the school site. He had collected articles from my soccer days and copies of the things I'd written. Somehow, he'd found out that I'd quit the school. He must have charmed that out of Sheila because my bishop would never have discussed it with anyone. He did have Jamie's name and the name and address of her clinic. But no note wondering if I might be gay. No indication of that anywhere. Is it possible he didn't suspect?

"So, 007, do you now know too much to live?" Marion stepped into the room with a fresh cup of coffee. "Am I going to have to kill you?"

I sipped the hot liquid. "No. I didn't get through it all. But I'm done for the evening. I gotta sleep on it and decide what to do with it."

Marion nodded. "I don't have to tell you I'd be ruined if it got out I wasn't Christian, right?"

I laughed. "People can't tell? You wear suns and moons and necklaces of women with big butts and say 'blessed be' all the time."

Marion didn't smile. "Pay attention, Lon. I don't wear them all the time. Only at home, or with some of the Belles. I trust those girls with my life. But the town? They don't know. It's a trick Denny and I use to survive in such a conservative place."

"Teach me."

She sat. "Get people to like you. As long as you don't do anything publicly wrong, you're golden. Because once these folks like you, they assume you're just like them. No matter what you say or do, they'll excuse it because they like you, and the last thing they'll do is admit they misjudged you or anyone. Judgment is too important to be questioned."

I let the hot steam from the coffee press against my face. "Aunt Kate used to say something like that. Like she could swear up a storm in town and they'd chalk her up as quirky, but if she published a letter in the Middelburg paper that had the word

'hell' in it, she'd be driven out of town."

"Something like that," Marion said. "Folks love me and they love my food. They think non-Christians are all evil Satanists. Since they love me, I must be Christian. Lapses in my speech are simply 'that silly Marion.'"

"Got it."

"You don't have to lie, just be good people, like you are. Be good people in all the ways that they think only Christians can be, then let them assume the rest."

I sipped my coffee. "But don't you think that maybe, if you told them you weren't Christian, they'd learn something? Like, that they are wrong that only Christians can be moral people and cook good food?" I indicated the files listed on the computer screen. "If some of these things were known, don't you think it's possible the whole town would benefit, would grow from it?"

All of a sudden, I wondered if that's what Vance TerMolen had planned. If his motive, instead of just destroying Star's game plan, had been to crack open the guts of this town so they could really see and love each other in a more true way. Did he believe they were capable of that goodness?

Marion blinked at me a little too innocently. "Isn't that the argument for gay people coming out? So people know the realities of them as real people, not TV stereotypes?"

*Ugh.* How had I led the conversation here? This I did not want to talk about, and couldn't without consulting Jamie first. We had made that deal long ago. "Yeah," I said. "Yeah."

Marion waited a second, and seeing I wasn't going to talk, stood. "Want to meet tomorrow? I can cut loose for a bit at ten. Just talk through it all after you sleep on it?"

I nodded and pulled the pocket knife from the computer. "That would be good. Because I've got an afternoon meeting with the church folks to start some serious discussion about reuniting the parish. I'll need a pep talk before that."

I'm not sure what I looked like when I dragged my exhausted and overwhelmed butt into the cottage shortly before eleven and popped the still sleeping Linus into his crate, but however I

looked, it didn't elicit any sympathy from the good doctor.

"We need to talk," Jamie said as I entered the bedroom.

"Hi. My night was fine, thanks," I said, kicking off my sandals.

"You aren't the one who got ditched," Jamie said. She sat propped against all our pillows, a stack of magazines in my spot and the bones of a gin and tonic on the bedside table.

"I explained about that." I shoved the magazines to the side and sat. "I can't believe you pay nearly ten bucks apiece for these things. They're mostly ads."

"It's how people keep current in fashion, Lonnie." She sighed and rested her hands together in her lap.

*Uh-oh.* The school marm pose always meant something bad followed by her plea to me to be reasonable. I decided to head it off. "You know what? Whatever it is, fine with me. I'm working hard here and things have been crazy. I'm thrilled you took time off to be with me, and I'm so sorry I haven't been able to spend much of it with you. I'd be mad too if I were you. So you're bored, you're lonely, and whatever you need, it's okay with me." I tried a smile. "I do want you to be happy."

She blinked. I'd truly caught her off guard. "I need some time alone."

I snapped off my shirt, then my shorts and undies and slid into bed. "I won't be home for another week at least." My head started to swim even before it hit the pillow.

"Lonnie." Jamie's voice swam behind me somewhere. "Are you falling asleep?"

"Nope, no, I'm listening, go on," I said, or tried to say. But I don't really know if I did or if she replied. I fell asleep.

The next thing I knew for sure was Linus barking, a serious puppy bark from the living room. Jamie moaned for me to get the damn dog, and I swung out of bed. "Shhhh," I whispered. "I'm coming." The clock said 4:18. It was pitch black outside. I pulled on my sweatshirt and shorts and slipped into my sandals, then tripped my way through the dark into the living room.

"Gotta go potty, boy?"

Linus barked again. Strange, since he usually whined. He must really have to go. I pulled him from the crate and took him outside.

Linus stepped off the porch and raised his nose into the air. I shivered in my shorts and T-shirt against the night damp. "Come on," I said, walking him toward the three giant spruces between the cottage and the road. It was his favorite spot. "Hurry up," I said. "Go potty."

He trotted his pudgy body after me, half-upright ears flopping. He began to sniff the ground, and I thought we might get somewhere, but then he raised his nose to sniff the wind.

I sniffed too. *Please, not a skunk*, I thought. But I smelled nothing. "Go on."

He spun to face me, looking behind me with wide eyes, and barked. I bent to shush him and to turn to see what animal was there and saw only slight movement before a bang inside my head and a white light. I heard my own thick grunt and had one slow second wondering what had happened before my knees hit the ground, then my chest. My cheek hit pine needles. Linus's feet filled my view, and he barked, frantic now. I reached out to grab him, to shush him, so Jamie could sleep. *In case I die, she should sleep*. I tried to look at my watch. *Sometime after 4:18...not good enough. If I die I should know...* and then I thought it was odd that I thought I might die and really didn't feel too bad about it.

## Chapter Thirty-four

*I am so cold. Jamie has stolen all the covers again. Lights hurt my eyes. Jamie here and not with that woman. That lawyer. Stay with me.*

“For God’s sake, Lonnie! Be quiet.” Jamie’s voice. Mad.

“Sorry,” I tried to say.

“Lonnie, look at me.”

I opened my eyes, but bright light stabbed them. I moaned and closed them. “Turn the lights out.” I thought I was dying. When? A minute ago? A dream?

“Lonnie...pupils...ambulance...bleeding.” Jamie’s voice was going in and out like a bad cell phone connection.

I peered through my eyelashes, wary of the sword of light.

“Do you know where you are?”

*Evidently not in heaven.*

“Do you—?”

“Wait.” I felt pine needles under my fingers. “Wait”—I’d

gotten out of—"bed."

"You are *not* in bed."

"I know." I wanted her to stop talking because it seemed so very loud. "Outside. Linus. I fell."

"Two out of three," Jamie said.

I felt something shift across me. "Blanket."

"You know I'm not stealing your covers, right? You're not going to talk about us in bed together, right?"

I wanted to press my hands against my ears, but nothing seemed to want to move. I experimented just bending my fingers. They seemed to work.

"Lonnie, no bed talk, right?"

"Right, right." I gave a push to try to sit up and felt a wind blow through me.

"No, stay." Jamie put a hand on my shoulder as I dropped back onto the ground. "I had to call an ambulance because there's a lot of blood. Probably a concussion. You may need a backboard. To go to the hospital for stitches. Films."

I opened my eyes again and saw Jamie had a flashlight pointed at me. "From tripping?"

She shook her head. "Someone attacked you, Lonnie. Just like that other guy who had the dog." She rubbed her face. Her hair looked like a mess. "The dead guy."

"Not dog's fault," I said.

I'd never seen her look quite so wrecked. Suddenly, a siren blasted in the distance and the flashlight beam wavered as Jamie stood. "You awake now?"

I tried to nod, but pain shot up my neck. "Yes." Her light bounced, and I thought maybe I'd sleep a bit again. Only Jamie wanted me awake.

"Lon, stay awake. You're alert now, right? No discussing us, right? Not to the paramedics or cops?" She had a panicked edge to her voice.

"Right." I had a headache, but really, I hadn't lost all common sense.

"Good. Look, I can't go with you, obviously. So I left a

message on the emergency number at the church.”

I told her Marion’s name. “Call The Windmill Grind at five.” I moved my fingers and toes again and thought maybe I deserved a nap.

Jamie’s voice floated in and out. “I’m crating the dog... someone at the hospital...get home...”

“Okay,” I said, as if it made sense. Mice wearing lead boots danced in my brain.

Jamie kept talking, but I couldn’t follow. “I can’t...take me down too...don’t call the clinic...respect my...you really love me.”

I reached up. “I do love you!” I said.

“For God’s sake, don’t shout!”

I didn’t realize I had.

“Do you want to out us to everyone? Jesus!” The wide beam swung across the yard. “The paramedics are here. Talk about your head. Nothing else.” I heard her sigh. Or maybe it was the wind. “You would get attacked. Just an accident and I could have treated you myself.”

“Sorry.” I asked what time it was. At least, I tried. I felt very woozy and confused, especially when the other voices and lights started and my body got moved, only I didn’t move it and I flew and rode in a truck and then wound up in a bed in a very, very, *very* bright room. In fact, later, when I tried to recall the whole event, the things I remembered most vividly were the ease with which I floated toward death and the incredible brightness of the ER in Tri-Cities Hospital in West Olive.

I’d lost blood, but not enough to need a transfusion. My skull had not fractured. I perked up after I got stitched and took some painkillers. “Hit you with the flat side,” the attending doc said as he snapped my X-ray from the viewer. “Lucky you.”

I mostly ignored him, fascinated by the complexities of the bow knot holding my hospital gown closed. Excellent painkillers have a way of making even simple knots endlessly engrossing.

I’d just started to stare at the pattern of blood soaking my sweatshirt and shorts piled in a corner chair, wondering how so

much of it could have come out of me and me still be alive to look at it when Red Carson swung through the door.

*What a cute little person. Freckles and curls. Like a kid, not a cop.*

Red smiled and stood beside me. "Looks like you're enjoying the Vicodin or whatever."

"I feel like my bones are floating and only my skin is keeping them on this planet," I said. "Like if you unstitched my skull, they would slip out and float away."

Red patted my hand. "Okay, Lonnie. Let's not give that a try just now, all right?"

"I'm just saying." I tried to focus on her eyes, but I had to keep blinking mine. Either she'd done a lousy job putting on her makeup, or my vision wasn't so hot.

She snapped on a pair of latex gloves and pulled a plastic bag from a wrapper. "Sorry, but I have to take these for evidence." She bagged my clothes.

"Can you get the stains out for me?"

She chuckled. "No." She sealed the bag and snapped off her gloves. "You and I are gonna talk, but not tonight. I'll come by tomorrow when you're less drugged up."

I blinked. "Okay with me. Hey, Jamie said—" I stopped, confused about what I should or shouldn't say.

Red stepped up again. "Your friend visiting from Chicago? She called nine-one-one."

I closed my eyes, tried to think. "She said someone hit me."

Red nodded. "Yes, Lonnie. Someone did hit you, with a shovel. Just like Vance."

*Just like Vance. Except... "I'm alive."*

Red smiled. "Yes. And we got the shovel. Whoever whacked you dropped it and ran." She pulled a folded photo print out of her jeans.

It was a tiny, saw-edged thing and coated with dark material that I did not want to see. I closed my eyes. My head dipped, and I opened them. "I'm not asleep."

She looked at me. "Okay."

"Star did it." Tears popped up as Red came toward me.

“You saw her?”

“Star made everybody hate me. At the meeting.” I swiped my eyes with the sheet. “She’s a mean person. I’m tired of mean people. Why can’t people just love each other?”

“Great question, Reverend. Let’s think about it tomorrow. Tonight, rest. When that medicine wears off, your head’s gonna hurt like hell.”

I must’ve slept because I felt like I’d returned to the elementary school and a room full of toddlers fighting over stuffed poodles yelled “mine, mine, mine” like a rock band gone crazy. So to stop the fight, I took the toys, only then they all came running at me with bright pink and red plastic sand shovels.

I opened my eyes to a nurse in bright fuchsia scrubs reading my blood pressure. “How’s your pain?” she asked.

I tried to locate any sensation in my head and realized I could hardly feel anything. Anywhere. “In my other body,” I said.

She smiled. “Well, your ride’s here. Time to go home.” She helped me swing my legs around and tossed some green scrubs at me. “Just wear this fabulous hospital gear home. Your scrubs are up front.”

“Can’t I have pink ones like yours?”

“Sorry, dear. Only when you’re a twenty-year nurse working the night shift.” And she handed me a urine sample cup containing my watch and rings.

A few minutes later, she wheeled me out to the waiting room where I expected to see Jamie. Instead, Claris McGavin stood there. Her graying bun hovered perfectly on the back of her head, not a hair out of place. She had on a blue Oxford blouse, pearls, a straight, knee-length black skirt, hose and black shoes with a periwinkle flower pattern cut into the leather and sewn with metallic thread. For some reason, I couldn’t take my eyes off them.

“Reverend Squires has had a lot of painkillers,” I heard the nurse say. “Straight to bed at home. And not left alone for forty-eight hours.”

“All right,” Claris’s voice said.

“Why are you here?” I asked her, watching those pretty flowers swell and shrink, swell and shrink. “Nice flowers.”

“Lonnie.” The nurse shook my arm, and I looked up. “Stay awake until Mrs. McGavin gets you home.”

“Thank you.” Claris patted my arm. “They’re new. And I’m here because your friend Jamie called the church, said she had to return to Chicago.”

“Okay,” I said, pretending I could follow any of it. I stood, wobbled.

Claris took my arm, looped it over her own and patted it again. “No matter, dear. Marion will be in after the breakfast rush.”

I guess I followed Claris to the car. She couldn’t have carried me. But other than hearing the puppy yelp when we entered the house and pulling the down comforter up to my chin, I don’t remember a darn thing until I woke up at two that afternoon.

## Chapter Thirty-five

I stumbled out of the bedroom, my head banging as if someone was on the inside hacking their way out with a shovel. Before I got to the bathroom, Linus barreled down the hall and jumped against my knees.

“Hey, sweet boy.” I bent over to pet him, which was a gargantuan mistake, and wound up sliding down the wall to sit. He crawled into my lap and kissed my face, which made me smile despite the head.

“Well, good.” Marion magically stood next to me, a hand on a red-veloured hip. “I was about to come hold a mirror under your nose.”

“Those are some slacks,” I said.

She spun like a model. “Velour warm-up suit. On super clearance at VanZant’s.”

Red with yellow stripes that matched her fingernails. Yellow sandals with a four-or-five inch heel. Big gold hoops and hair

stylishly mussed as always.

"I don't think I look as good as you," I said, trying to stand.

"You look like shit, hon, but at least you're not dead, thanks be to the great goddess Gaia." She pulled me up and into a hug. "That means you look great to me."

I pulled on some sweats and brushed my teeth, and after a short debate, took another round of pain pills. I tried to do something with my hair which was a matted mess, but I couldn't work around the stitches. Eventually I gave up and wandered to the kitchen. "I could eat anything. A lot of anything."

Marion stuck a steaming bowl of chicken noodle soup in front of me. "Homemade. Claris brought it around noon."

I ate. "So did Jamie go to the beach?"

When Marion didn't answer, I looked at her. She had that look of pained anticipation someone wears when they have to tell you really bad news.

"I don't think so, Lonnie."

"Okay," I said, taking another spoonful. "Where is she?"

Marion's eyes narrowed. "She said she'd explained it all to you last night while you were waiting for the ambulance. And I told her that bleeding out of your skull might just affect your memory a little." Her eyes softened again. "Do you remember talking with her?"

I thought about it. Something about stealing bed covers. "No." I looked around and didn't see her bottles of herbal supplements or stacks of magazines.

Marion patted my hand. "You can do much better, Lonnie."

I took a big spoonful of soup and stared at it. "I'm still a little shaky with my hands." I wanted to go back to bed, call Jamie.

Marion stood. "That's not what I mean, and you know it." She handed me an extra napkin and a folded paper then squeezed my shoulders. "It's okay with me, hon. Your private life is your own. But if you want to talk, it's okay with me." Then she took Linus outside.

I unfolded the paper. *Lonnie, I called the school to get the insurance number and they told me you'd quit.*

I closed my eyes. *Oh no.* I kept reading.

*I don't know how you think. What you think! What secrets you have! I won't risk my clinic. You're dangerous. I've called Cheri, and by the time you get home, I'll have a new place for you to live. I'll handle it fairly, so don't worry.*

I almost got killed by the Middelburg shovel-death-monster and she was dumping me? Jamie was dumping me?

I looked back at the note. She didn't even sign it.

People don't just split up after almost seven years of marriage, legal or not. *Well*, I thought, folding the paper, *sure they do, but I don't.*

I could feel the funny floating feeling starting in my arms and legs again. My pain pills must be kicking in. I wanted to call Jamie before I got loopy, so I took a phone into the bedroom and sat on the edge of the bed. Of course, she didn't pick up. She was probably still on the road home.

"It's me. Please let me explain. Please." I paused. "Love you."

Poor Jamie. We'd drifted a bit for the last six months or so, she at the clinic, me so unhappy at the school. Now, she'd found out I'd quit and not told her. I shouldn't have done that. No wonder she'd freaked out. I'd have to promise to be better to her. I'd get rid of Linus tomorrow, do more of the housework at home. Everything would work out when I got that job at St. Greg's. I could explain it all.

I placed the phone on Jamie's pillow and felt the man trying to bang his way out of my head again. She couldn't have left me forever. *Even Mom and Dad, even they got back together. If I just hang on...*

I pulled the comforter up over me, and before the tears even started, fell back into sleep.

I woke again because I heard snoring on the pillow next to me. I knew Jamie wouldn't leave me.

But the warm snoring presence next to me wasn't Jamie. Instead, Linus lay on his side, eyes closed, fat feet pointed toward me.

My eyes stung, and when I shook my head against the sting, my skull throbbed. I could hardly see. I pulled the covers over my head and sobbed. Even the blinding pain in my head didn't stop me. I sobbed for Vance, for Linus, for Woman at the Well, for all the people whose secrets I'd read the other night and who probably felt hurt and scared, for the horrible scenes Colleen and D.J. and I had endured at the town council. I sobbed because I'd left a job I hated and so my partner had left me. I sobbed because there was such a small, thin space between being alive and being dead and I so did not want to die. I sobbed because I wanted to sleep, and then I sobbed until I did.

When I opened my eyes again, yellowing gray light filled my bedroom.

"Lon?"

It took me a while to remember I wasn't at the Streeterville condo, and then it all blew through me like a gale. Murderer. Secrets. Jamie gone. "What time is it?"

"Not quite eight." Marion stepped into the room. "P.M. And Red Carson is here again. I can tell her you're still asleep if you want."

I sat slowly and felt steady. My skull felt like it had a heartbeat of its own, but it was manageable. "Is it still Wednesday?"

"Yep. If you're gonna talk to her, I'll head home. Claris will be here in an hour to spend the night, and I can go home to the boys."

I stood, waited for the wobbles to come, but they didn't. "Jamie?"

"She's gone, hon. And you need someone here tonight. Doctor's orders."

I nodded. Even that didn't hurt quite so badly. "Tell Red I'll be right out. And thanks." I washed my face and tried to do something normal with my hair, but it just looked like hell from sleep and dirt and antiseptic and the buzz cut they'd given me around the stitches.

In the living room, Red sat on my couch looking entirely human and relaxed in black shorts, clogs and a Detroit Red

Wings polo shirt. Even her hair seemed curlier.

“So this is an off-duty chat?” I leaned against the doorjamb.

“I’ll probably put whatever you say in the investigation report, unless you’d rather I came back in uniform.”

Disappointment made me sigh. “Okay. Let me take the dog out first.” Linus and I walked out front, and the wall of heat almost knocked me backward. Last time I’d stood here, the damp had chilled me. And I’d almost died. I felt my legs tense, fought the urge to leap back inside. Enough light still shone to see the yard empty, perfectly safe. *It’s perfectly safe*, I told myself, forcing myself to approach the spruces, scanning for anything out of the ordinary. No footprints. No broken branches. Even the guidelines for the leaning middle tree looked undisturbed.

“Not many people would walk right back into the place where they almost got killed,” Red said from the porch.

*Goose steps on your grave.* That’s what Aunt Kate used to call it when you got a cold zip up your spine that made your whole body shudder, like mine did now.

“It’s my own front yard,” I said, watching Linus run up to her. “At least for now. What choice do I have?” The voice of reason—such bullshit. I really wanted to run inside, jump into bed. Hide. Hide and sleep and sleep and sleep.

Red bent down and rubbed the pup, then threw a pine cone for him. “The backyard?”

Okay, that was funny. “Nah. Too close to the woods. If I were keeping him, I’d have to get a pen.”

“You aren’t keeping him?”

I shook my head. I didn’t say why. I didn’t want to talk about the Jamie-shaped wound carved out of my chest.

“Ah.” Red opened the front door for me. “Come on, Linus. Let’s see what we can scrounge up for your caretaker’s dinner.”

I followed Red into the kitchen. “I’m fine, really.” Total lie. Everything hurt too much. I just wanted to go to bed, then get up and go home to Chicago.

Red lifted a plain brown bag from the counter. “I don’t know about you,” she said as she carried the bag to the dining table,

“but when I’m on painkillers and missing a lot of blood, I want doughnuts. Glazed.” She pulled two tiny paper plates, napkins, and straws from the bag. “Pauline’s Donut Den is open twenty-four seven. Two for you and two for me.” Then she walked to the refrigerator. “Plus cartons of plain old white milk.” She balanced four of them against her chest. “Just like in elementary school.”

If you had asked me what I wanted to eat, I would never have said a reminder of elementary schools or doughnuts, but now that she’d mentioned it, it was exactly what I needed.

## Chapter Thirty-six

I reached into the bag to give us each a pastry as we sat. “You were on painkillers and losing blood? You get shot?”

“Around here?” Red grinned as she bit her snack. “Hell, no. Gall bladder surgery got messed up and I bled out into my abdomen. Had to have a second surgery. After that, ate nothing but doughnuts for a week.”

I nodded, swallowed, and reached for my other doughnut.

“So,” Red said. “You know you got hit with a shovel?”

“Yeah.” Sugar surged through my veins. “Same as Vance.”

“Maybe even the same shovel,” Red said. “Your attacker dropped the shovel, so the forensics people will match it to Vance’s injuries. Or try.”

I nodded. “Must’ve been the size of a telephone pole.”

“Actually, it’s small, a nifty military job. Folds up and everything.” Red pulled another doughnut from the bag. “Unfolded, it’s about as long and heavy as a baseball bat. Just

right for swinging. Folded, it would fit into a tote bag. Blade's about eight inches wide and sharp as a chef's knife on either side. Which is what did Vance in."

I shuddered.

"You got the flat side." Red licked glaze from her fingertips. "So, can you tell me what you remember?"

I repeated everything I'd told the doctors and the police last night. She didn't take any notes. Just listened.

"So, right before you got hit, you turned and bent forward because the dog barked?"

"I'm pretty sure, yeah." I could see her wheels turning. "Why?"

"Means Linus here probably saved your life." She gave him the last bit of her doughnut. "Good dog. So," she locked eyes with me, "why does someone want you out of the picture?"

"Why would anyone do this to anyone?" The lamp dangling over the table felt yellow and harsh.

Red stared at me. "You're the priest. Aren't you the specialist on good and evil?"

"No. I'm the specialist on peace and justice. On reconciliation." My head hurt, so I touched my forehead. My fingers felt cool and soothing. "At least, I'm supposed to be."

"You need to lie down?" Red rose.

"No. When did it get so hot?" I felt dampness on my neck and back.

"Warm front blew in last night. Supposed to stay the week." Red wiped some crumbs off the table. "Hope you brought summer clothes. They're predicting high eighties."

"Wow." I couldn't think of much else. My head hurt and I was too hot.

"So, about the person who hit you?"

"If you want good and evil, talk to Brady Wesselynk." I wadded up my napkin. "You got a gun on you?" When Red nodded, I eyed her for a telltale bulge. "So should I be scared of someone carrying a gun?"

"Gun, no. Garden tools, yes," Red said.

I could tell she was trying to make me feel better and I appreciated it, but I didn't feel better. "Everyone's mad at me lately."

"Name everyone."

"Everyone. Why name them?"

Red picked up the rest of the doughnut crumbs. "Marion?"

"Well, no, not Marion."

"Then not everyone."

"God, okay!" I swallowed, felt the Jamie-sized wound gape a little larger. "Bishop Tappen and Peter McGavin for starters, because I haven't magically solved the parish's problems." I hadn't talked to either of them, but I could imagine their wrath. "Everyone who doesn't want the parish reconciled."

"Isabella Koontz? Jack Putnam?"

I shrugged. Neither of them had seemed mad at me. "They both seemed a little annoyed with Vance." I explained why.

"Ivor Koontz punched his wife because of something Vance said?" Red inched forward.

I nodded. "But why would he come after me?"

"Who knows? I'll check his alibi, though. For both times."

"Star's mad at me because I weaseled Woman at the Well out of signing her heinous Middelburg Family Values proclamation and because I spoke against her at the town council. And she pretty much told the whole town I was going to stop Orion GameTech from coming, so anyone who wanted that to happen might be mad at me." I described the fiasco of Monday night. "And Brady might be pissed because I told him off."

Red nodded. "What about Jamie Wollsey?"

Chest throb, gape. "What about her?"

Red chewed on the inside of her cheek. "You didn't fight or anything?"

Fear spiked up my spine, and my head throbbed a loud bass *boom*. She probably knew we had the same home address. "Housemates argue. Who left the dirty dishes, that sort of thing." I knew she was watching me, but I didn't look at her.

"Sure," Red said. "But housemates don't fight with the same

passion as say, lovers.”

I gulped air, trying to get a clear head. “Jamie would not try to kill me.”

“She doesn’t inherit your savings, your life insurance and so on if you die?”

She did, of course. We’d had the legal documents drawn up before our blessing. I didn’t say anything.

“She’s got a new clinic,” Red continued. “Lot of debt there, I’d imagine. And, I understand she was visiting here this week. Though she’s gone now. With you hurt like this. Seems odd.”

I shook my head, which made it ring. “She got called back for a patient.” My thoughts swirled like paints mixing together. She’d left me alone with this.

“She told the police she was asleep when you got hit, which no one can corroborate. And she doesn’t have an alibi for the time of Vance’s death.”

*Oh shit. She has an alibi. She was having sex with me.* I tried to look cool. “Of course she has an alibi, she was with me.”

Red scooted her chair back so she could lean against the wall. “You said you were napping.”

Between the drugs and the booming and my mouth suddenly dry, I wasn’t sure what to say. I got up and went to the sink. “You want a glass of water?”

“No, thanks.” Red watched me. “I haven’t connected her to Vance yet, but I’m only really starting to dig.”

Getting investigated would kill Jamie and she’d never talk to me again, for sure. I pulled a glass from the cupboard, trying to look calm. “Actually, she was napping too.” I switched off the faucet. “Didn’t mean to mislead you.” I raised the glass to my lips, hoping my hand wouldn’t shake. My head thrummed.

Red still watched me. “But if you were asleep, how do you know she was here? I mean, she could have slipped out while you were asleep, right?”

I swallowed wishing I hadn’t taken any drugs. Wishing my head didn’t hurt quite so God damned much. Wishing I had just stayed in bed.

"I appreciate your clarification and all," she said. "But really, with this attack on you, I think I have to look into Jamie's—"

"No. Please." I put the glass in the sink and leaned over the counter. "Please."

Red suddenly stood beside me. "You need to sit down?"

"Jamie didn't kill Vance." I looked at Red, the deep brown eyes and the spray of freckles across her nose. Without her uniform, she looked younger than thirty, younger than twenty even, with those crazy curls. "Please. She was with me." *Please*, I prayed. *Help, help, help.*

Red nodded. "Okay, I'll make you a deal. I'll put her at the bottom of my list."

I almost sobbed with relief.

"We shouldn't be talking about this anyhow," Red said, taking my arm. "Marion will beat the shit out of me if she hears I upset you. You need some rest." She steadied me and led me into the bedroom. "But if I don't turn up someone else, we're coming back to this, and you're gonna have to explain it fully. On the record."

I sat on the edge of the bed. "Okay."

"Can I ask you another question?" Red asked. "So I have a place to start tomorrow? Do you always take the dog out at the same time?"

"I've only had the dog four days." My mind drifted, and I kept seeing Star yelling down at me from the stage. She hadn't known I would stand up to speak, but when I did, she attacked me. "Hey," I said, sitting forward. "The killer couldn't have known I would come outside then. So why was he—or she—there?"

"Waiting because he knew eventually you'd take the dog out?"

"Or she." I held my head gingerly. "I don't know what I did to make so many people mad at me."

Red patted my thigh. "Way I figure it, kiddo, it's more what you didn't do."

"What do you mean?"

"I meant you didn't grow up here. Even if you did summer

with your aunt, you're still an outsider and therefore, the easiest person to blame. By picking on you, Star and the others aren't angering your parents and grandparents and seven layers of aunts, uncles, cousins and fourth cousins once-removed."

I noticed her earring glinting in the bedside light. A tiny diamond chip. Or good fake. "Small town."

"Worse. Small town taken over by members of one church desperate to forge an identity on not being like the rest of the world. Bought out most of the folks who'd lived here, barely tolerated the ones who wouldn't leave, and kept families together for family strength, ethnic heritage and religious purity."

"Make one mad, make 'em all mad, huh?"

"Mostly, yeah. The Episcopalians never left. And a few new folks have moved in. And generations change—which is how you get folks like me and Marion and some others."

"But there aren't a lot of you."

"No." Red watched me a few seconds. "And while all that explains why everyone's mad at you, it doesn't really explain trying to kill you." Her ear glinted.

"Can you ever explain why someone would do that?"

"Actually, usually, yes, you can."

That scared me worse than anything. Someone wanted me dead and I had no idea who. Everyone, everything and every place was a threat. No wonder Jamie had left. I lay back wondering how I'd ever get up and go forth again.

I dreamt of Aunt Kate. A dark summer night like so many others. Linus had to pee and she'd told me to take him way back in the woods, into the blackness, so he wouldn't ruin her yard. I didn't want to. The dark scared me. She laughed at me, pointing a big-knuckled finger. "My favorite niece is a wimp. A chicken-shit. I'll go. You do the dishes, little girl." But I ran out of the house, trees groaning and clutching at me. Then faces appeared in their trunks: Star and Brady and Jamie and Aunt Kate and my mom and dad and sisters and bishops and toddlers. Then the branches turned into shovels and swung at me, closer and closer no matter how fast I ran.

I jumped awake, out of bed and into the morning. A beam of dusty sunlight squeaked through the closed blinds. 8:15. Thursday.

I blinked, grateful for the daylight and infuriated by the dream. I was not spending another night like that again, ever.

I dug through my drawer for fresh clothes and headed for the shower. *You're such a bitch, Aunt Kate. Haunting me at a time like this.* I didn't need her on my back too, from the grave, no less. Still, no way was I living in fear or letting my partnership just fall apart. Jamie had left because I'd made some bad decisions, gotten involved in this mess, hadn't told her the truth. I could've been as dead as Vance, but I wasn't. As Marion would say, the universe had other plans for me. Starting now, I would follow them.

Claris met me in the kitchen. I thanked her profusely, then begged her to drop me and Linus at Colleen's salon, promising to return to the church as soon as I got tired. I didn't mention I had a busy day planned.

Colleen's Cattery felt cool and alive, with buzzing chatter from the women and a warm whirl of dryers. Coconut and mango and eucalyptus and piña colada smells mixed with the aroma of fresh strong coffee. Colleen dropped her scissors and hugged me as Linus and I walked in. "Make me look decent," I said.

She put her current client under a dryer and sat me in her chair. "Now we're in my territory." She draped me in a plastic cape. She lay out scissors and a comb like surgical instruments. "We've all been worried sick. This is the least I can do after the other night."

"Not that I really helped."

"Nonsense. You helped all of us see what's really going on in this town. The true face of—" She croaked as she lifted the hair that covered my wound.

I watched her in the giant mirror I faced. She turned whitish, then set her face in determination. She reached for a large hand-held mirror and held it up so I could see my wound for the first time.

All I have to say is, no wonder it hurt so badly. And I wish I'd

had someone with neater needle skills and a better eye for color pick the thread and stitch me up. “A quilter’s nightmare,” I said.

Colleen nodded, face serious. “This will require more layering than you’re used to. Maybe some gel to give it body. But it’ll look sharp. Promise.”

I rolled my eyes. My flat black hair always hung straight and ended at my shoulders, except for when I had it tied back in a ponytail. Hair products were Jamie’s gig.

Forty-five minutes later, I emerged from the salon a new woman. I felt the hot breeze on my neck and bangs tickling my forehead. I think my head actually felt lighter. Colleen had shampooed and clipped and shampooed again, then gelled, and blown dry, all while avoiding the wound. “I look downright sassy,” I said when I saw myself. “Kick ass.” The salon ladies applauded her efforts and waxed enthusiastic at the chance to watch Linus for the afternoon.

Next on my list, I had decided it was time to chat one-on-one with Star Hannes. *Call me a chicken-shit, will you, Aunt Kate?* Let’s see how Star handles me when she hasn’t got a shovel or an audience.

I marched out of Colleen’s, across the street and east to a suite of offices in an old brick two-story. No one in the reception area asked any questions. *Look like you know what you’re doing*, Aunt Kate had said, *and you can get in almost anywhere*. Of course, that was long before the days of homeland security. Still, it worked in Middelburg. I climbed the stairs to a narrow hall and a series of small wooden doors with frosted glass and pushed right through the one with the small brass sign:

Star Hannes, City Council

Gilles Hannes, Attorney at Law

Though there were two names on the door, there was only one desk and one occupant. Star looked surprised, but then switched off her computer monitor to give me her full attention.

“Come in, Reverend Squires. I have equal exchange decaf Sumatran in the press. Would you like a cup?”

I sat uninvited while she crossed to a credenza that held the

coffee service. The furniture looked antique, which surprised me. I'd have guessed her for a modern ergonomic furniture kind of girl.

"Gil's working at home today," she said, pouring a packet of pure cane sugar into a thick hand-thrown mug. "Which is just as well, so we won't be interrupted." She looked at me, and I realized for the first time that her eyes were green. So green, I wondered if she wore colored contacts. "You and I have a few things to..." She paused to shake her packet empty, then looked back at me. "To clarify between us."

My legs bounced. *Let's go!* I thought and my heart raced like a game had just begun. "For starters, why do you care so much what happens to that little church?" I figured this was why she'd come after me at the council meeting—maybe even with a shovel.

"I don't." She watched the press carefully as she poured. "Normally, I'd let the liberals hang themselves with their convenient principles and cultural brainwashing. Maybe when their little congregation here fails they'll leave town altogether."

She poured a second cup and returned to her desk. "But right now, I care more about this community than anything else." Her eyes dug into mine. "Anything. Do you understand?"

I nodded and took my mug.

"And I will not have this kind of social unrest in my backyard, not when I'm trying to convince Orion to settle here over dozens of other places in the world he might go. Not when I'm trying to secure the economic future of this town."

That explained Star. Egoistic, power-crazy and mean, but civic-minded. "Second, how did you know I'd rescued Vance's puppy?"

"Do you mean, how did I know you broke into his house but, inexplicably, were not arrested for it?"

I just stared at her.

She allowed a little smile to play on her lips, knowing I'd see it. "Let's just say Officer Don Loomis doesn't succeed by virtue of his brains alone."

Mental note: nice guy offering hanky sells secrets to Star.

West Michigan nice again. “Finally,” I said, “I wonder, Star, if you have an alibi for Wednesday morning at about four a.m. Got anyone who can prove you weren’t in my front yard, whacking me in the back of the head with a military grade folding shovel?”

For a moment, I saw what I’d been aiming for. Genuine surprise and discombobulation. She hadn’t seen that coming and didn’t quite know what to say.

I decided to keep rolling. “The same for Saturday afternoon, when Vance was murdered?” She’d be just the type to slip her feet into Alec’s work boots to save her expensive designer shoes.

“What do you mean?” Her cheeks flushed.

“Just chatting, friendly-like.” I blinked, calm as a cucumber. This felt like a breakaway on an open net, though I knew the defenders were right behind me and gaining.

She sipped her coffee, regaining control. But the tension at the corners of her mouth and the pink flush in her cheeks gave her away. She reached to her lap, to smooth her skirt. Her suit today was lightweight linen, a concession to the heat, and mango-colored.

“Convenient,” she said, “the attack on you. A clever way to make it look like you had nothing to do with Vance TerMolen’s death. Too bad it won’t work.”

## Chapter Thirty-seven

I hadn't seen that coming, but I couldn't let her steal the ball. Had to keep my eye on the offense. My game.

"You've got the motive," I said. "His death would end the church split, and your Middelburg would be without blemish for Orion. You had the means because anyone can buy a shovel like that. So, if you didn't have the opportunity, you'd better start saying so, because people are talking." I didn't clarify that the only people talking, as far as I knew, were me, myself and I.

That got her. Her eyes shifted as if looking for constituents to poll. "People think that I—? Please. I was shopping all afternoon at The Windswept Mall with Claris and Mimi. They'll confirm, of course. We met there to take advantage of the spring sales. Mimi bought a gown. Claris had a big bag. Three pairs of shoes, I think."

I just raised my eyebrows and waited.

She looked a little more panicked. "I was home when you got

hit. In bed. Gil knows.”

Here I stole a page from Red Carson’s book. “Not if he was asleep, he doesn’t. You could have snuck out. Whacked me as I cared for Vance’s poor, orphaned puppy.”

“Why in heaven’s name would I do that anyway? You’re—” She stopped and narrowed her eyes. “Okay, Lonnie. I want a straight answer to something.”

I leaned forward, my own eyes narrowed. “Shoot.”

“What do you have against Orion GameTech moving its R and D division to Middelburg?”

I jerked up with surprise. “What? Why would I?”

“Or, if it’s less confusing, who put you up to stopping it? Is it some agreement you had with Vance TerMolen and his gang to destroy the town? To destroy my career?”

“That’s crazy! No!”

“So it seems.” She pursed her lips to think. “But every time something threatens my presentation of this town as the perfect location for Orion GameTech, you appear in the middle of some disaster. The disintegrating parish. Vance’s murder. D. J. Brinks’s disregard of the law. Now a second attack.” Her hands settled on the desk. “Do you realize we haven’t had a violent crime in this town in three decades, but we’ve had two since you came to town just a week ago?”

I thought of Isabella’s black eye and mentally corrected Star. No *reported* violent crimes.

Then I saw the whole thing from Star’s point of view, a misguided one to be sure, but it explained a lot. “People tend to call priests and police when bad things happen,” I said. “Which explains some of why I am where I am. Finding Vance was bad luck. Getting attacked?” I shrugged. “You tell me. But I don’t care about GameTech. I’ll be gone in another week, so good luck to you.”

“*You* might provide *me* with an alibi for your whereabouts last Friday,” Star said.

“My first day here? Why?”

“Someone rummaged through this office.” She leaned

forward over her desk. "Someone broke into my space."

Her voice made that goose walk up my spine again. Star was majorly pissed off. I wouldn't have been surprised to see her teeth elongate and start to drip with acidic goo.

"Any ideas who?" I asked. I could smell the leather from the chair I sat on. Such an elegant comfortable space for such an inelegant conversation.

"If not you, then Vance. Only I can't figure how he got in here. Probably blackmailed one of the cleaning staff."

It would never occur to her he'd used Mimi's key. I struggled to keep a straight face, wondering what Star would do if she found out how her right-hand gal had betrayed her. But the more I learned about Mimi, the more I gathered betrayal came easily to her.

"Since then, of course, I've taken everything of any importance home with me each night. Nothing remains here on paper or on the computer."

"Maybe it was someone after your husband's things?"

She leaned closer to me again. "My private space has been violated, Reverend Squires. My safety has been taken away." Her mouth tightened in a peculiar way, and I realized she was fighting back tears. "If someone can get into my office, can they get into my home? What would they do to hurt me? My family?"

"I understand." The stitches on my head throbbed as I realized I felt sorry for her.

Her eyes glinted, her whole face edgy. "You do *not* understand. I grew up here. Married, raised my boys here. My family has lived here for six generations. The chair you're sitting in belonged to my great-great-great grandfather when he taught at Five Points, and I let you or any visitor sit in it to welcome you, whether you know its history or not. This is my home. *My home*, Reverend Squires."

Something inside me loosened up in that moment that I stared at Star, her eyes full of pain, her hand trembling. I didn't like her and I thought she had done some heinous things, maybe even murdered Vance, but she deserved compassion. I'd grown

up with family scattered all over the country, so I couldn't begin to imagine her loss.

"I'm sorry," I said.

I think we shared a microsecond of human bonding. Then she snapped. "So don't tell me how to handle the people of this town." Her wide gold loops bobbed in her ears. "You don't know who we really are."

I laughed thinking of Vance's files and how I probably knew more than anyone. I ran my finger around the lip of my mug, feeling the bumpy ridges of the fired clay. "Isn't that why Vance was working on his project?"

She rolled her eyes, tossing her head so I could see the perfectly even lines of navy mascara. "Why do people choose the absolute worst times to dig up old history, to create havoc that can only do damage?"

Not a bad question, actually. "Some people are willing to look in the ugly dark places that others want to leave alone. For instance, you." She had to see the hypocrisy of what she said. "The church split could have remained an internal event. *You* made it public. Vance's death could have been a tragedy that brought the community together in sadness and mutual support. *You* used it to scapegoat a little kid. And whether you swung the shovel or not, I'm pretty sure your little speech blaming me for all this might be what got me hurt."

Star pressed a palm against her frozen hair. "I act for the best of the community."

"I think you do," I said. "But Vance did too. Both of you bring to light the stuff that has to be examined if this place is ever going to be healthy."

She laughed a harsh, unhappy sound. "Not all information is the same, Reverend Squires. Surely, even in your naïve tower of love and light, you understand that some information carries more power to damage than others." She leaned back in her chair. "Clearly, Vance did not understand this."

We stared at each other. I decided to approach from a different angle. "Why'd you hire Jack Putnam to do the electrics

for your soundstage?”

Star shifted in her chair setting her body at an angle and looking into the distance. She was about to lie. “Least expensive. The budget for this event is embarrassingly small. The council just doesn’t understand its importance.”

There was something about the contract she didn’t want me to know. I thought about the jpg of the revised drawing I’d found in her file on Vance’s flash drive. “So you don’t have the money to pay someone to double-check his work. Do upgrades or anything?”

She looked genuinely confused. “No. Why, has Brady been implying Jack can’t do it right? He’s just jealous.”

Suddenly, I felt all my connection with Star deflate like a stuck ball. I stood. “Thanks for the coffee.” I was done trying to deal rationally with her. “And just so you know, if you bug me or my church or my friends again, the metal spikes go on. Back off, and we’ll exist in peace.”

I guess no one had ever spoken to Star Hannes like that in her life, because she didn’t say anything as I left. I felt so free I considered a slide down the banister, but decided against it because of my head.

Star’s reaction to my question about Jack made me want to have a talk with him, maybe even catch his reaction to that revised drawing I’d found a photo of in Vance’s files. When I called, Jack seemed relieved to hear from me and said he could sneak away for a bit. We agreed to meet in the park in ten minutes. Nice thing about a small town—anyone can be anywhere in ten minutes. I called Marion and invited her to come too, if she could escape the late morning diners.

Central Park bustled today with crews in cherry pickers hanging blue and white banners celebrating family values and other folks pounding together the stands that would house the various groups and activities.

“The soundstage arrives tomorrow,” Jack explained as we headed for a picnic table in the shade. “I’m itching to get everything set up. I’ve got the cables and can lights and gels and

mikes and all of it crated and ready to move.”

“Sounds like a big thing for one guy to set up,” Marion said. She’d brought us a fresh blanket and sliced it into six flaky pieces.

“I got a crew, middle schoolers mostly, and a retired electrician. They can do the muscle work while I supervise the quality. There’s a lot to get switched on just right because of the wireless mikes, especially the remote switching so they aren’t on all the time. Plus, being in a park like this I gotta bring in my own transformer. Power feeds from the pole over there, but I have to have a box to send it to all the right places in the right amounts.” He looked at me, then at Marion. “Your eyes are glazing over, ladies.”

“It’s all Greek to me,” Marion said, pushing a plate toward him. “Eat.”

“So, is a light plan something you revise once you’ve designed it? You know, redo circuits and switches and stuff like that?” The blanket melted in my mouth, the sweet almond paste dissolving with the crust. Heaven.

“Well, if something has to get switched on the fly, sure,” Jack said, rubbing his neck. “But I’m pretty careful with my designs. It works a lot better if everyone knows exactly what’s going on.”

I pulled the printout of the jpg from my pocket. “So, this then. I’m just curious what all this means.”

Jack took it, glanced at it, then shoved his plate aside and smoothed the paper out on the table. He stared at it a full minute before he spoke. “What is this?” He glanced at me, at Marion. “What are you two getting at?”

Marion glanced at me, eyes wide. “Getting at nothing.”

“I found the drawing in something Vance had given me.” I stretched the truth, I know. “I haven’t taken it to the police yet. I thought maybe I’d ask you what *you* were getting at?”

“Me?” Jack slapped the paper. “Do you know what this is? Someone trying to ruin me, that’s what. These markings here, in red and blue? That’s someone re-drawing my plan.”

“How?” I leaned forward.

Jack ran a thin finger along one of the lines. "Someone has figured out how to hack into my light board here. And they've run too much power to this can light series here." He pointed. "These are metal lights suspended on a beam about twenty feet above the stage. During the day, they'll give better light and the colored gels keep people from looking washed out. Star insisted."

So that's why the lighting cost so much.

"And this"—Jack pointed to a serious of numbers—"looks like someone has figured out how to rewire the switch on lavalier mike number three so that when it's turned on, these lights will get a power surge. That's crazy."

"What's a lavalier mike?" Marion asked.

"Little one, attaches to your shirt with a power box on your waist," I said. "We use them all the time in church." I studied Jack who looked bewildered. "Why would someone do this?"

He shook his head. "I don't know. It would explode the lights. Maybe start an electrical fire. Sure make a big bang and a lot of pieces flying everywhere. Scary as all hell." He looked at me again, his long fingers flat on the paper. "Vance gave you this?"

I shrugged. "It was stuck in something else. I'm not sure he knew what it was."

"An explosion like this could really hurt somebody," Jack said, "depending who was on the stage where when mike number three got turned on. But as far as I know, the only time three lavalieres should get turned on occurs when Star and the mayor present the key to Middelburg to the Orion CEO."

I don't think any of us knew what to make of that, because none of us said anything.

Jack folded the paper. "Well, ladies, I think Vance was trying to ruin Star Hannes's event. And wanted me to get blamed for doing it. He was a bastard."

## Chapter Thirty-eight

I thought about Jack's theory the whole way back to Colleen's to pick up the pup, and then to church. What if someone other than Vance planned to ruin Star Hannes's event, maybe even kill or injure someone on the stage, and make Jack the fall guy? Even if Vance was a complete jerk, I didn't think the Dope had that kind of violence in him.

I'd convinced Jack and Marion to keep the whole thing quiet for a day or two and think about the best way to handle it. If we let it play out until someone actually rewired Jack's setup, we'd at least catch one crook. Maybe, in some way I didn't yet understand, that guy would lead us to Vance's killer.

*Though*, I thought as I left the unseasonable blast furnace of outside and felt the parish house's coolness, *that would wreck my theory that Star was somehow behind Vance's death.*

"Did you try the buttermilk pop?" Claris asked as I passed her desk.

"I didn't go to The Grind." My face must've betrayed my enthusiasm.

"Blessed are they who have not seen, yet come to believe," Claris said. "You are a doubting Thomas. Won't believe it's any good until you taste it with your own eyes." She wagged a finger at me. "But you're worse, young lady. You won't even taste it."

I heard Aunt Kate's voice calling me coward even as I considered the image of tasting something with my eyes. I raised my hand in a pledge. "I promise to taste buttermilk pop the very next time Marion offers it to me." Now, I just had to tell Marion I never wanted to see the stuff, and I'd be off the hook. "Oh, and thanks for picking me up at the hospital and sitting with me the other night. I thought maybe you'd be home catching up on your sleep today."

She shook her head. "No, no. We've a parish newsletter to get out and bulletins to finish for Sunday. No rest for the weary. And really, the couch was quite comfortable."

I decided Claris was probably a saint. How else could she have lived with Peter all those years and kept such a kind spirit? She was like Mary Richards working for Lou Grant.

I found my tiny office close and stuffy, but not as hot as I'd feared. Linus gnawed happily on a bone while I spent the next hour or so reading stuff I'd printed out from Vance's file.

I skimmed the annual reports from Orion GameTech. Not much there interested me except the millions they made in profit and the recent deaths of the father/son team who had founded the company, both of heart attacks and only a few years apart. The new CEO, the grandson, was a younger man, with teenaged kids, who clearly understood media better. Recent corporate updates had more pictures than words, more color than not, and a URL to a Web site that included demo games and sneak peeks at upcoming animations and stories.

His biggest change, though, was his intention to move the company headquarters from California to the Midwest. Away from the techie lifestyle into "the heart of America," he'd said. Where his customers lived and worked. Where he could find

a greater cross section of people. I threw that file down with a snort. Middelburg hardly provided a cross section!

I skipped over the sheets of personal data Vance had gathered on Orion's wife and kids in favor of a skim through the collection of local newspaper articles he'd scanned or downloaded. I found marriage and birth announcements for the McGavins, Mansers, Marion and Denny, Hanneses and many, many others. Obituaries in another stack, including my Aunt Kate's. Her face grinning out at me from underneath that goofy wicker hat of hers stopped me short. I remember she'd told me once, years before her cancer, that when she died she wanted this particular picture printed with her obituary. "I look a bit like Kate Hepburn, don't you think?" I'd learned by then not to disagree. "That's how I'd like people to remember me." Then she'd clutched my hand in her incredibly strong fingers. "And you, Lonnie, I'm trusting you to make sure the casket is closed, no matter what your sappy father says. Got it?"

I'd gotten it and I'd done it all, half-convinced her ghost would haunt me forever if I didn't. I reread the article, how she'd never been married, worked as a nurse during the war, then as part of the medical crew at a local racetrack until she made millions with an investment in cable television. She'd bought the land on the lake in the Sixties when land near backward Middelburg was still dirt cheap. When she died, she left me enough to pay for college and seminary and gave my sisters and dad some, and that was it. God only knew what she had done with the rest of it. Her place got sold, and I hadn't been back since.

*Maybe I should drive out there, look at the old place.*

I shook off that thought—*really, why bother?*—and flipped through the rest of the articles, which didn't seem to be in any order. One about Calvin Manser's hiring at Five Points, with an old family picture of him with Mimi and Alec, a square-headed babe in arms. Another about Berend Berkoop catching the biggest walleye pike ever recorded out of the Pigeon River. Brady Wesselynk breaking ground to build Frontline Church. An anti-abortion protest in front of the Chrysalis Center. I checked

the date. It was 1972, right after *Roe versus Wade*. I scanned the faces to see who I recognized. A young Star, I thought, standing in the background with a sign. Maybe Jack Putnam on the edge of the photo. I couldn't tell if he was protesting, or protesting the protesters. My eyes stopped over the woman in the other corner of the photo, fist clenched and raised, mouth stretched with shouting, sign proclaiming *Abortion is Murder*. I almost didn't recognize a young Claris, not because the photo was so grainy, but because it was so out of character for her. Claris as young political activist. Surprise!

The next showed Gil Hannes opening his law firm, two little tow-headed boys in matching suits standing in front of him and a meek-looking Star. Hmm. Fifteen years ago. That'd make her boys college-aged now. She's sure changed in fifteen years. I wondered why? What had happened to her? Next, Peter McGavin installed as rector at Woman at the Well. The Belles—my team—winning the championship. Marion and I both weighed a lot less then, I thought, looking at the photos.

Amusing as Vance's collection was, my head started to hurt pretty soon, and I packed up and headed out to see if Claris would drive me and Linus home for a nap. "I hate asking you," I said. "Especially when you seem to be holding down the fort here all alone. Seems that Peter leaves a lot in your lap." I hadn't seen him work a full day yet.

"Nonsense," Claris said. She tapped her lips with a pen. "It's like when you go to the mall with friends, like I did the other day with Mimi and Star?" She got the impression she wanted me to know she had these friends. She struck me as lonely. I felt guilty, because really, I'd ignored her. It was easy. She faded away so quickly. Then I thought of the fist-raised protester. Maybe if I just took her out for a beer sometime I'd see her spunkier side.

"And you all have different things to do," Claris continued, "and it's just so much more efficient sometimes if you split up, even though it's more fun to stay together. You try to balance it out. That's what Peter and I do."

Something inside me jumped as I replayed what she'd just

said. Did she just say that she had *not* spent the entire shopping time on Saturday afternoon in the company of Star? No one had mentioned that before. I held my breath, willed myself to look as calm as possible. I needed to go carefully here. “So, you guys split up at the mall? Is that the best way to cover it all in an afternoon?”

Claris looked a bit flustered by my change of topic. “Oh, yes. Yes, we did. We all had different things to shop for you know. So part of the time we split. I’m not exactly sure where Star went then.”

Still casual, I hoped, I continued. “So, if I went with my mom sometime, should we do the together stuff first, then have a lunch, then split up? Or do you wind up covering the same things twice? What do you think?”

Claris considered. “Well, we did two anchor stores together before lunch, then split for the specialty stores because, you know, I wanted shoes and I’m not sure what Star and Mimi wanted, and then we got back together later. We got home about four.” She smiled. “Is your mother coming to visit soon?”

“So, we should plan on splitting, what, an hour? Two?”

Claris smiled. “Do let me know when she comes. Perhaps we can all have a lunch.” She turned away from me to shut down her computer.

I bent down to pet Linus, trying to hide what I knew to be an idiotic triumphant grin. Star had not been shopping with Mimi and Claris Saturday afternoon when Vance was killed. She’d been out of their sight.

Could Star have driven home, called Vance from my hotel for a meeting—my hotel was on the way—killed Vance, then gone back and pretended she’d been at the mall all along?

Suddenly, my head didn’t hurt quite as much, and I knew what I had to do. “You know,” I said, “I think maybe I’ll wander over to The Grind and check out that buttermilk pop for lunch. Marion can take me home when the rush ends. Don’t want you to think I’m a coward.”

Claris nodded. “Good for you. You’ll see. It’ll surprise you.”

About twenty-five minutes later, I followed Marion's spiky orange sandals out the back of The Grind and into her car. Her eyes were shaded behind bright yellow plastic-framed sunglasses.

"No way I'm missing this," she said, keys clanging against a heavy ornament of a bear containing an arrow and a spiral. "Good thing you need a chauffeur."

"I wouldn't have gone without you." Marion's Ford Focus smelled like dope. "Mare, have you been—"

"No," she said. "It's white sage smudge. Keeps the spirits pure in here. Good for the aura and road rage."

"Unh-huh." I decided not to argue and studied the feathers, strung together with leather, hanging from her rearview mirror. "Don't those make it hard to see?"

"Turkey feathers. Channels energy of hospitality and friendship. Keeps the road warriors at bay."

"Road warriors in Middelburg? Come on."

"Honey," Marion said as we drove south through town, "you get cut off by someone around here, odds are good there's a plastic Christian fish stuck to the backside of the car."

"Yeah, but that's because most cars here have those fish," I argued. "I think you're over-generalizing."

"Maybe, but this keeps me out of wrecks."

I checked on Linus, who stood in the backseat looking out the side window. I hoped Marion wouldn't mind the nose prints. "So, how much time do you think?"

"Drive from the mall to the Interfaith Project House, kill Vance, drive back and show up looking like you'd been trying on Dior cocktail dresses the whole time? I sure as hell couldn't do it," Marion said. "But I'm not Star Hannes. For her, I'd guess an hour."

Marion drove us to the Interfaith House. "We might as well start here," she said. "The miles are the same, no matter which way we drive them, right?"

Made sense to me. I clicked on the stopwatch feature of my wristwatch, and we were off. "No racing," I reminded her as the

speedometer climbed. “A murderer wouldn’t want to get stopped for speeding.”

Marion rolled her eyes at me. “That’s some messed up karma.”

In twenty-six minutes we arrived at The Windswept Mall and parked. It took us another three to get to the food court where Claris said they’d parted ways.

Marion stopped in front of the Sole on Fire shoe store. “Hey, cute sandals. I’d trip in ‘em though.” She pointed to the sparkly lavender flats I’d seen on Claris the other day. Marion pointed to forest green flats, plain, with just a tiny scalloped edge. “Holy goddess! A hundred and eighty-seven bucks? For those?” She turned to me. “When my kids are out of the house, I’m buying expensive shoes too.”

I clicked off the watch. My head had started to bang again, and I wanted to find a water fountain so I could take some ibuprofen. “I just need a restroom before we go back.”

Marion knew the mall well, and turned me toward the closest ladie’s room.

“So,” Marion chatted, “we’ll drive back to the house, go in, maybe pretend to change shoes, bash someone, change shoes again, and drive back. All without breaking a sweat. Hey.”

I had stopped in front of a kiosk that sold charm bracelets and hand-painted silk scarves.

“You see something for yourself?” she asked.

But I was looking past the kiosk at the outfitting store across the way. Featured in a camping display in the front window was a military style folding shovel. Exactly the same shovel that had put this pain into my head in the first place.

## Chapter Thirty-nine

“Mickey’s Gear,” I told Red Carson on the phone. Marion was driving me back to my house after our whirlwind trip. “In the northwest arm of the mall. Those shovels are on clearance, for God’s sake.” Somehow, the idea that I’d been nearly killed with a clearance item really pissed me off.

It had taken us one hour and twelve minutes to make the round trip from Interfaith House to the food court, including the time to enter, change shoes, murder, change shoes and leave. Miming that had been creepy, but worth it. I thought Star could have pulled it off. We had just busted her alibi.

“No one saw her that whole hour!” I said. “I’m telling you, arrest her.”

“That is hardly evidence to arrest her,” Red said. “But I will ask her about it.”

I shifted impatiently in my seat. A huge dark green farm tractor lumbered through a field of chunky dirt. “She’ll just lie.”

"Maybe. Or maybe she'll have some proof to offer. Like Ivor Koontz, your last theory?"

"He has an alibi?"

"For Vance's murder and your attack. Multiple witnesses saw him at a ball game in Grand Rapids on Saturday, and he and Isabella were actually up Monday night with a sick kid. So he's in the clear."

I grasped at some way to keep Star from weaseling out of this. "But Star will make something up." I couldn't believe Red could care so little about my major breakthrough. There had to be a way to prove Star had left the mall. "I know. There is no way Star Hannes spent that time in a mall without buying something. Check her credit card purchases. See if she bought anything during that time. And parking lot security tapes. I'm telling you, she wasn't there."

"I know my job, Reverend."

"Sorry." I could feel my nerves about to bust through my skin. If my head didn't hurt so badly, I'd go find D.J. Brink and play an hour of one-on-one on some big field somewhere. I needed a long run to get rid of these jitters.

"You've had a big week," Red said. "How about I call you when I find out more?"

I clicked off and rubbed my temples.

"You look done in," Marion said. "I probably shouldn't have had you out this long."

"Nonsense. I'm just tired." I grinned at her, slapped her bicep. "Just like being on the pitch in the old days, huh? You and me and a mission. We might just have gotten the breakthrough that will win the game."

Marion grinned too. "Yeah. I know I told you to keep out of all this, Lon—"

"And you were right. If I'd listened, I wouldn't have this hole in my head."

Marion nodded. "Yeah, but I was gonna say I'm glad you didn't listen."

"What, you like the hole in my head?"

She laughed. "Not so much, no. But you're good energy, Lonnie, and it's been good having you around. You've sure spiced up my life, and I think, even though it's been a pain, you're doing some good here. Stuff that's gonna help things around town."

No one had said anything like that to me since I'd arrived. Not even Alec Manser, whose butt I'd gone out on a limb to save. "Thanks, Mare. It feels like God put me on a roller coaster in the dark and I don't know what's going to happen next or when it ends."

She nodded. "The universe works that way. You just gotta try to enjoy the ride."

*Enjoy getting whacked on the head?* I thought a minute. "Well, okay. I did get a cool new haircut out of it." I fluffed my hair like I'd seen Jamie do a thousand times, and we laughed.

"You rest," Marion said as she walked me into my cottage. "I know the doc said you could drive tomorrow, but you want me to come get you? Better yet, you staying here?"

"No, thanks. I'm meeting a group to set up the children's game area in the morning. Don't know what I'll do the rest of the day."

Marion gave me a hug. "You feel up to it, come help me at The Grind. I've got about three hundred different pastries to make for prizes, not to mention dozens of individual things for sale. It all has to be wrapped in cling wrap. Free buttermilk pop for lunch if you help."

"I'll help if you feed me anything else."

"Chicken," she said and waved as she drove away.

Even the thrill of nailing Star Hannes didn't keep me on my feet for long. I think I fell asleep before I even hit the bed.

Linus woke me up a few hours later for his dinner. I watched him eat and missed the clutter of magazines that attended Jamie wherever she went. She'd be at the clinic now for evening hours. She couldn't totally brush me off there. At least, I could leave a message if she wouldn't talk to me. I knew her receptionist would deliver it.

When Marge answered at the clinic, I told her who I was.

Normally, that alone would get Jamie out of just about anything except a surgery.

"I'm sorry, Lonnie," Marge said. "Dr. Wollsey is with a patient and can't be disturbed."

I knew she didn't have evening surgeries. Something was up. I played my wild card. "Tell her it's an emergency." I felt only a little guilty about the lie. If Jamie had picked up any of my calls since she'd left, I wouldn't have done it.

Linus scarfed down his food while I waited, then trotted into the living room and came back with his squeaky toad. I tossed it and Marge came back on the line. "I'm truly sorry, but Dr. Wollsey advises that in the case of a medical emergency, you should call nine-one-one. No one here can help you. Have a nice day." Then she hung up.

As Linus trotted back to me, I felt like I'd been hit in the gut as well as the head. Part of me wanted to drive straight to Chicago and drag her out of that damned clinic of hers and make her talk to me. Another part wanted to forget the whole thing. I had a dog and good friends and—

*And what? A great job? No. A successful consulting job? No again. A fabulous home. Three big strikes.*

I ate a bowl of Cap'n Crunch while tossing the toad and generally wallowed in my misery. Nothing spells misery needing comfort like a second bowl of Cap'n Crunch, so I ate that too, followed by a 3 Musketeers bar. I debated calling Red and asking her to bring more of those fabulous doughnuts. I felt the sugar coursing through my veins, but it really only gave me enough gumption to walk the dog around the house, triple-check the locks on the doors, wash up and fall into bed.

When I opened the door to let Linus out the next morning, the unseasonal heat knocked me back again. Working in that park, even with its tall trees, would be a sweaty, sticky mess. I decided to dump any sort of professional wear and go with athletic gear. At least the fluorescent orange soccer shirt would wick moisture. Even my normally flat hair didn't need gel. Thanks to the weather, it frizzed right up. In the melting heat of the car, Linus flopped

over, pink tongue drooping. The parish house stayed cooler than the cottage, so I figured I'd crate him there. It'd be easy enough to check on him from the park.

The streets were full of parked cars, and one look at Central Park showed why. People bustled about setting up folding chairs, duct-taping down wires, decorating and stocking booths, hanging more ribbons in trees, dead-heading flowers. After depositing Linus in my office, I wandered over to the children's play area sponsored by Woman at the Well. Even wandering at my slowest, I broke out in a hot, clammy sweat. Isabella and Kitty Gellar worked side by side in front of a cluster of boxes.

"Hi, Lonnie," Isabella said. Her bruise had disappeared thanks to time and skillfully applied cover-up. "We're distributing prizes from here"—she pointed to a box full of inexpensive baubles like jacks and rings and party squealers—"into these numbered bags. Then we're going to write big numbers from one to twenty on the bottom of all these plastic ducks." She gestured to another box. "Everyone gets a prize from a bag that matches the duck they pick."

Day-care flashbacks made me shiver, but I grabbed the permanent marker and started numbering ducks. One of the things that had driven me crazy about working with little kids was this exactly, the sheer number of little things that had to be done to set things up for their enjoyment. You couldn't just hand them a good book and tell them to read.

## Chapter Forty

“I must say, Father,” Kitty croaked as she dropped a single bright red pen from her veiny fingers into bag number twelve, “I’ve rarely seen a priest attending a public event dressed in such a carefree manner.”

“Well, Kitty,” I said, forcing a smile, “this is really the hard work *before* the public event.” Isabella, thank God, wore a tank top and short shorts, and her black hair frizzed out worse than mine. Kitty, however, wore the usual polyester suit, with high-collared blouse and thick, stable shoes, all red and white today. It must be at least eighty-five degrees already, with a thousand percent humidity, and not a bead of sweat on her.

“It’s a different generation, I know,” Kitty said with a sniff. She glanced sideways at Isabella, the woman set on splitting up her church. “I guess I shouldn’t expect to understand.” She looked back at me and gently touched her own eye in the same spot as Isabella’s bruise. “And at least we can agree on the fun of

setting things up for the kiddies.”

I nodded, glad to learn Kitty cared for Isabella despite their differences. And I kept numbering. Soon Claris joined us, along with several of the Belles. It was good to laugh with the girls again, to receive their hugs, to feel them so glad to see me okay after the attack. They broke into smaller groups and began to work on different games. When a fight over poster paints broke out, I thought Kitty Gellar might have a stroke, but rather than say anything, I decided it was time for a little walk. Let them work it out.

The soundstage stood at the end of the park farthest from Woman at the Well. It looked like an eighteen-wheel trailer with one long and both short ends snapped off to reveal a fancy dance floor and a backdrop rigged for screens or curtains. Light rigging had been built in two towers on either side of the stage, with a crossbeam between them and a stabilizing beam connecting the center to the back wall of the stage. Wires hung where can lights hadn't yet been hung. All very complicated.

Jack rolled out from underneath the rigging on one of those mechanic's scooters. “Hey, Lon!” He gave some instructions to two teenagers then wiped his hands. “Just double-checking that the wheel locks are in place. And the power connections underneath look fine.” He waved at a man passing with an armload of straw brooms and bent closer to me. “You find out anything?”

I shook my head. “No. I still think the best thing to do is to let it play out until the last minute, when the sabotage has been done. See if we can catch ‘em in the act or something.”

“I'd like to put a guard on the thing, twenty-four seven. But I can't pay for it.”

“Just as well. We want them to do it, remember, not stop them.” Proving who had planned this would not take as long as identifying Vance's murderer if I could help it.

“If it wasn't Vance, it was that damned Ivor Koontz.” Jack wiped his forehead with the back of his hand. “If I see him hanging around, I just might wallop him.”

“Hold your temper, there, cowboy,” I said. Otherwise,

Ivor would pulverize him. "Remember, deep peace. Love your neighbor as yourself. Isn't that the mantra of this new parish you want to start?"

He blushed. "How do you do it? As a priest, how do you keep so even-tempered? Keep the right frame of mind all the time?"

I laughed until I had to wipe my eyes. "Trust me, I don't." If he only knew.

As if to prove it, my heart did an angry squeeze when I spotted Brady working with several others on the salted licorice booth sponsored by his church. No missing the six-foot banner advertising The Frontline Church of Christ spread across the top. "You hang in there," I said to Jack, and headed over to chat with Brady. He ran neck and neck with Ivor, in my mind, for man most likely to be involved in sabotaging Jack's staging.

"Nice setup," I said. "You sure the banner's big enough?"

Brady wiped his hands on his khakis, which, for the first time, looked wrinkled and worn. He nodded toward my church's play area. "Can't tell who's sponsoring that." Then he beamed on his banner like a proud papa. "No shame in proclaimin' allegiance to Jesus Christ, Lonnie. At least, not in my church."

"No shame in simply doing good works with humility, at least, in my church."

Brady laughed, exposing his big white teeth. "Maybe that's why I've got fifteen hundred a service and your parish has, what, maybe eighty-five members total? And it's splitting in two? Or did you resolve that?"

I tipped my head to concede his point. Much as I'd love to duke out some theories on congregational development with him, I wanted information more. "So," I said, stepping toward the stage to lead him a bit away from the others. "Sure hope nothing goes wrong with any of this, for Star's sake." Brady looked startled. "I mean, I don't really agree with her about much of anything, but still, I'd hate to see someone put this much effort into something and have it turn out a disaster."

"Mighty compassionate, Reverend Squires," said Brady, smoothing his hair. "I, for one, wouldn't mind seeing her taken

down a peg or two. Still," he said as he folded his arms across his chest, "it won't happen."

"No?"

He stared at the stage, at Jack's crew scurrying up the towers, and shook his head. "Haven't you figured Star out yet? Anything that happens—and I do mean anything—she turns to her advantage. It's her God-given gift. She tosses me out and hitches up with Jack, and instead of people mistrusting her for breaking her word or hiring someone with no experience, they applaud her for fiscal sensibility and mentoring a new business. Vance gets himself killed, and she turns it into a war whoop against juvenile delinquency."

"You helped with that one," I said.

"Lonnie, when I bike in a race, I let someone else take the lead and ride in the draft. When that leader peters out, I still have some gumption for pulling it out to win."

So, he was waiting to make his move in this town when the time was right. I studied him. His too-early tan glowed against the expensive polo shirt. His clothes and hair never got mussed, and I knew I was a sweaty mess. "You think Star's going to burn out?"

Brady shrugged. "She's the most powerful person in town. I'm not going to cut off my nose to spite my face, because no matter what she does, frankly, I might need her someday. That's true of me and of everyone else in town and she knows it. That's why she can treat whomever she wants like cow manure." He turned. "Except Vance, who didn't care. And you, evidently."

I grabbed his arm. "Wait! Do you think she had Vance killed? Me attacked?"

He shrugged a shoulder. "I couldn't say. And I mean that. Even if I knew for sure, I could not say. I have to live here, Reverend Squires, and serve my flock. Bringing the wolf down on us doesn't serve them a bit."

As I walked back across the park, I realized the truth of what he'd said. No matter what happened, Star had turned it to her advantage. That was a talent I needed more of. No need to

worry about someone sabotaging her little show tomorrow. If it happened, she'd make the proverbial lemonade and sell it for a profit.

*You got it, came that voice inside me. Star will profit!*

I stopped in the center of the park, near the circular fountain lined with blue and white delft tiles of scenes from Dutch life. If a disaster occurred during the show, Star could profit, especially if she knew it was coming. And she'd know if she set it up herself.

I sat on the edge of the fountain as things clicked into place inside my head. A setup explained everything. She originally contracted with Brady like she always did for the work, but then struck up some sort of relationship with Ivor Koontz. Maybe an affair, maybe just a business proposition. He could help her get some great publicity if she helped him with something he wanted—the contract for the new rec center. I looked back at the stage. Ivor knew how to set it up so something would explode, maybe cause a little smoke. Something that would look and sound dangerous and scary, but which really wouldn't endanger anyone. Then Star could step up, with a well-placed fire extinguisher or by quickly shoving the mayor out of the way. She'd be a hero, Jack would get discredited, and Ivor would be the only local electrician in good standing.

And Vance had all those papers in his notes and had called Ivor, said something that made him furious. Had Vance figured out what was going on? Had it gotten him killed?

I watched Brady help a woman lift a heavy box. Nothing in my gut told me he did it. I didn't like how the guy operated, but somehow, I didn't think he'd do something like this. At the next booth, a tatted lace stand sponsored by Eleventh CLOSER, Mimi Manser and another woman hung blue and white bunting. What did she know? Without Vance, where did her loyalty lie? Would she, like Brady, stick with Star because she was the best bet in town?

I stood. How could I prove that Star had planned this to promote her own reputation even if it cost Jack his? Call Red? She didn't seem too eager to listen to my theories when I'd told her

about the mall yesterday, though she had agreed to check it out. Confront Star? *No*, my intuition said. No way. Too dangerous. Someone around here had tried to kill me, and I sure didn't want to encourage them to try again.

No, the plan I already had made the most sense. Let everything play out and then, right before the event, tip Red off and let her handle it from there.

My cell rang and I checked the number then snapped it open. "Speak of the devil," I said.

"Hey," Red said. "I've got some news on your theory about Star and the murder."

## Chapter Forty-one

My heart tapped against my ribs. “We nail her?” *Because, honey, I’ve got another chapter of the story to tell you.*

“Fraid not,” Red said. “Her alibi checks out. Star made three purchases in the hour in question.”

Disappointment sank through me. “You sure?”

“Sure. And none at Mickey’s Gear, by the way. And no, no one else used her credit cards. One of the boutiques has security shots of all customers. Definitely Star.”

I spun where I stood, looking around the park for Star, like seeing her would help me understand. “So now what?”

“Don’t you have some church thing to do for tomorrow? Or my house needs to be vacuumed if you’re really that bored.”

“Beats writing numbers on duck butts.”

We were both silent.

“Look, Lonnie, I appreciate all your help. You’ve dug up a lot of interesting information.”

Way more than she knew. I wondered again if keeping Vance's notes could land me in jail.

"I think what you should do now is go be a priest. And I'll go be a cop. I got a hot tip on some turkey poaching, so I thought I'd spend some time in the woods today. Tomorrow, I'm stuck in town. We all are."

"Happy Family Values Day," I said with as much dramatic misery as I could muster.

"Yeah, that and Orion's visit and the Ollibollen Breakfast. What a scene it's gonna be. I'd rather be chasing drunks with rifles through the woods in deer season."

"Is that where the action normally is around here? In the woods?"

"Yeah. Poachers mostly." Red sighed. "We are getting toward the end of the list of suspects, Lonnie. I promised you I would leave Jamie until last, and we're nearly there. We need to talk about it soon."

"No!" I hurried toward the edge of the park, voice low.

"She needs to be questioned."

"Not yet. Please." I crossed Main Street near where a cherry picker held a man aloft to change a streetlight bulb. "Wait until after Orion's visit. See what turns up then."

"Okay. As long as nothing bad happens in the meantime. Especially to you."

I wondered if a broken heart counted. But I shook that off. My heart wasn't broken, even if Jamie had refused to take any of my calls. I'd work it all out.

"Until Monday, that's all," Red said. "I know it's hard to think ill of people we love, but—"

"Don't patronize me. I think ill of people I love all the time."

That shut her up, but only for a second. "It isn't good detective work to assume someone is innocent for any reason. Those are the very people who often do commit terrible crimes. Because they are the ones who can get close enough to pull it off."

"That's a dark view of humanity." I watched the man in his

hovering box and debated going to The Grind. It would still be packed with breakfasters.

"Maybe. But it's accurate," Red said.

The man tipped his hard hat at me as I watched. "Don't you think there's goodness and grace and charity and love and heroism and—"

"Yes, of course, yes," said Red. "But you don't have to be on the lookout for those things. They won't whack you on the back of the head with a shovel."

I stopped and watched the cherry picker crew maneuver the box to the next light pole. "On the contrary. Those are exactly the things you have to be on the lookout for more and more. Because they are getting harder to see."

Red was silent a second. "I guess so."

We were both silent again.

"Tomorrow," Red said. "Maybe I'll run into you?"

"I'll be around to help with the kids' station," I said. "And I wouldn't miss Star and the mayor's presentation to Mr. Orion for the world. What time is that?"

"It's at ten thirty. Maybe I'll see you at the Olliebollen tent sometime before that?"

"Sure. We can watch the presentation together." All the better if I had her with me when time came to expose the sabotage. Star may not have killed Vance herself, but that didn't mean she hadn't had someone else do it. Maybe Ivor, in exchange—no, Red had already told me Ivor had an alibi. Well, someone.

"Lon?" Red said. "Go be a priest. It's your thing."

It felt like a blast from a trumpet, a reminder of the job I'd lost sight of, even though it was what I'd stayed here to do. "Right. I'll see you in the morning."

I headed back across the park toward the Well's booth. From here I could see the Belles laughing around Kitty Gellar, who didn't laugh, but who wasn't scowling either. Isabella just glowed. For the first time since I'd gotten here, these members of the parish had joined to work for something together. I felt my insides expand. This was, indeed, my thing.

We worked for a couple more hours, painting two plywood windmills for the beanbag toss, calculating the logistics for a toddler-version cakewalk, cutting holes in boxes for the “stick your hand in a box” guessing game.

Star Hannes never appeared in the park. “No doubt she’s in Grand Rapids at some spa,” Annika, the Belles right midfielder, said when I mentioned it. “She might do a final check, but she’ll be doing the beauty thing until she picks Orion up at the Holland airport at six thirty.”

I thought about tomorrow morning. If the city key celebration started at ten thirty, then Jack and I should meet up with Red at ten fifteen for his final inspection. The show would have already started, with a kids choir singing right before, but he could get one of his crew to run the follow spot. Whoever planned to rig the extracurricular light show would have no reason to suspect that Jack would do another complete inspection once the performance began at nine.

Noon crept up on me. While the rest of the crew took a break to munch sandwiches and chips the Belles had brought, I skipped out to take a break with Linus before I headed to The Grind to help Marion wrap pastries. As I reached out to pull the church door open, it sprang wide in front of me. Alec and I stared at each other, then he laughed. “Hey! Rev. Lon. Hey.”

Peter stood behind him, wearing his clergy blacks as always, despite the roaring heat. Between them stood a petite girl with radiant red and white hair, two hoops in her right eyebrow, a nose stud and more earrings than I could count. Even with all the body hardware, her plain beauty shone.

Alec backed into the church to let me in. “Hey, this is Ruth.” He gently touched the girl’s arm with his forefinger.

She beamed at me as she offered her hand. “Ruth Manser,” she said, then glanced at her father. “You all right, Daddy?”

He closed his eyes and dramatically shook his head. “I guess I just have to get used to it.” When he opened them again he looked at me. “I understand you knew about this?”

I wasn’t sure what to say and looked at Alec for a cue. “Ruth

convinced me we needed to let the lying go, for the baby's sake," he said. "I guess she was right. We told her dad everything just now. Even about Vance."

"The amount of trouble you could be in," Peter said to me, his voice stern. "I don't know what to do." He paused.

I waited for all hell to break loose. He could turn me in to the cops, his bishop, my own bishop. Once the cops started asking questions, Jamie would be on the block. I could feel the blood draining from my face.

Peter took my hand. "Really, I don't know what to do to thank you. You risked yourself to honor the struggles of my daughter, of the man she loves, of their child. Not many people would have done that. You had no reason to help them, not after the way we—I—treated you. But you helped keep the family in peace. Thank you."

"You're welcome." I didn't know what else to say. "What does Claris—"

"We haven't told Mom yet," Ruth said. "We're off to find her now." She glanced at her dad. "I'm a little afraid she'll flip. She always had a big thing about premarital sex and when she figures out the dates, she'll know."

I remembered the picture of her protesting against abortion. "I'm sure your mother loves you, no matter what."

"Then we tell my parents," Alec said, rolling his eyes. "No bets on how that will go. But it's the best thing." He wanted to believe that. I could tell.

"It is," I said and hugged him.

"Hey," Ruth said, waving her hand in the direction of the park, "it's all in the spirit of—what are they calling it?"

"The Middelburg's Family Values Celebration," Alec and Peter and I all said together.

"That's us," Ruth said, patting Alec's arm. "A family."

"You kids go on out," Peter said. "I'll catch up in a minute." After they'd left into the bright sun, he took my hand and for the first time, smiled at me. "I want you to know that in the last several hours, I've seen my world in new ways. What I've done

that I didn't mean to do and what I've left undone because of my—well, how things could have been better. Or, God forbid, worse." His gaze strayed after his daughter. "It's like having your life flash before you, but without the near death experience."

I nodded.

"It has made me reconsider the parish situation." He studied the ground, his spit-polished black shoes. "My rather inflexible line toward the others and their wishes."

I wanted to do a jig right there. If he lightened up a bit with Isabella and the others, promised not to put the parish under a foreign bishop, they'd reconcile eventually for sure! Woman at the Well would be diverse and challenged and whole, and I'd be a success!

"It's the best thing, really," he said.

"Yes!" I tried to calm the victory energy pumping my legs.

"I'll tell the bishop tomorrow," Peter said, "that I support the parish split."

My internal jig tripped and tumbled. *What? Support the split?* "No!"

He cocked his head. "I thought you'd be pleased with an end to the squabble."

Lord, the guy didn't understand anything I'd been trying to achieve here. Of course, maybe that was because he'd refused to talk to me all week. "Not this end. My goal has been reconciliation, with people of different points of view living together in respect and love. Where's the richness, the diversity in a split?" I clasped my hands together in front of me. "I was hoping for union..." But I couldn't go on. Suddenly, I felt the hope—for reconciliation, for a job, for Jamie—collapse around me.

## Chapter Forty-two

Peter smiled as if I were a little kid. I thought he might pat my head. “Do you really think that’s possible? After the way they insulted me? The bishop? The town?”

Evidently, he hadn’t had a complete change of heart. Still, I said, “Yes. Forgiveness only happens when there’s something to forgive.”

He drew a breath like he might argue but then let it out. “Then maybe we should both speak to the bishop tomorrow. Thank you again.”

The church doors opened, and I felt the blast of light and heat against my skin. Alec slipped back in, and when the doors closed behind him, I could barely see him in the shadow.

“Just wanted to check in on one thing,” he said in a pseudo-whisper. “About my mom.”

“Okay,” I said, squeezing my eyes so they’d adjust faster.

“I decided to pitch that key. You know which one. I just left

that whole thing completely out of the story we told the rector, and I'd sure like you to forget about it too."

"Why?" I could see his face now, worried but open. Ruth did him a world of good.

"Because if I give it to Mom, she'll know that I know. And if I just plant it where she finds it, she'll know someone knows. And it'll haunt her. What she did is her life, like what Ruth and I did is about our lives. She can tell me in her own time, if she wants. And if she never does, that's okay too."

I gave him a quick squeeze. "Wise boy. I won't tell."

I didn't have time to tell anyone anything in the scurry of hot pans and tangled cling wrap that defined my afternoon. Marion and two of her staff had pastries measured, mixed, shaped, baked, cooled and cut faster than D.J. and I could wrap and price them. We worked from lunch until past dinner. D.J. ran to church twice to play with Linus and when Marion dropped me off at home just after eight, I looked a lot worse for the wear than the pup did.

"How do you think I keep in shape for soccer?" Marion asked when I complained about my aching feet and back and arms.

"Yada, yada." I waved, promised to meet her tomorrow at nine for the meat-filled pancake and Olliebollen breakfast—though I definitely did not promise to eat either thing—and tumbled into the cottage. I'd overdone it today as surely as I had stitches in my head, but it had been a good day. I drew a bath, and once settled in the cool water, called Jamie's cell, then our home. I decided not to leave messages anywhere. Maybe I'd been going about this all wrong.

I slumped into the tub, my toes wrapped around the chilly silver faucet. What a strange day. Orion turning out a little progressive. Star sabotaging herself but cleared of Vance's murder. Ruth convincing Alec to tell their parents about their marriage and child. Alec deciding not to confront his mother about her affair with Vance. Claris, fist clenched, at an anti-abortion rally. Peter supporting a church split.

Love sure made people act in funny ways. Sometimes good, sometimes bad, but driven by love—for themselves, for others—

people did amazing things. Look at me, still calling home.

It's why I believed so strongly in reconciliation. Love had great power. People could do great goodness with the love they felt, once they got past anger and fear.

That and the horrors of my childhood. *Lord*, I thought, laying a cool dripping cloth across my forehead, careful to keep my stitches dry, *I must be tired*. I almost never thought about that. Mom and Dad fighting all the time, every day. Starting to divorce when I was nine, getting back together, starting again, battling over custody, threatening to steal us away from the other parent, finally divorcing when I was thirteen. Shipping me off to Aunt Kate's for the summers because neither of them could handle my constant protest against their ruination of my family. Shuttling back and forth until I graduated. Having to negotiate them when they came to watch my soccer games, but refused to be within one hundred feet of each other. My college graduation. Then Annie's cancer when she was only twenty-one, after my first year at seminary. Suddenly, Mom and Dad working together, supporting her, supporting each other. Annie's surgery, chemo, near death, sudden recovery. Mom and Dad arriving together for my ordination—*surprise, honey*—remarried. Peace again.

Sixteen years of anguish—my anguish, my sisters' anguish, our lives torn apart—completely unnecessary. If they had simply seen beyond their own needs, made the union of their differences their priority, our childhoods would have been spared.

Of course, who was I to talk? I'd clung to my need to escape the school, quit without consulting my partner, gotten involved in a situation I never should have gotten into and nearly wound up dead. I needed to consider my own advice.

And I heard Marion's voice. *Some relationships aren't meant to succeed*. I'd always believed that couldn't be true, short of physical danger. Relationships were how God worked through us. I glanced at my cell phone. Would Jamie and I be better off without each other? I mean, did I really want to be in relationship that only worked if I had a job I hated? I'd supported Jamie for years. Didn't it seem fair that she take a turn?

I crawled from the tub and patted myself dry then tumbled into bed knowing Linus would wake me around midnight to go out. I didn't think I'd be frightened to stand in the dark front yard, but if I was, tough. The darkness had to be faced.

## Chapter Forty-three

*So, you loser. Admit it. It's kinda cool.*

I stood in the middle of Middelburg's Central Park just before nine, my face tilted toward the morning's cool, dry breeze, and took in the opening of Middelburg's Family Values Celebration. Yeah, I hated the title, but the event rocked, in a small town sort of way.

I'd made fun of it all week, but this morning I saw that Middelburg was a nice place. And not that snotty "West Michigan nice" Marion always talked about, but real West Michigan nice. Nice people, beautiful town, great landscape, perfect beaches. Not perfect, but nice.

The booth closest to Woman at the Well's play area exploded with sprays of tulips in yellow, red, red and white stripes, purples, pinks and burgundies, all swaying in the delicate air. Isabella, Annika and Char had started a short sack race for the few toddlers who'd made their way early to our spot. The kids laughed and

fell over, struggled up and laughed more.

I regretted not bringing Linus because he would have loved all the commotion and smells, but I needed to concentrate on Jack and Red and Star this morning.

Across the park a long line of people, mostly blonde and mostly tall, chattering away with each other with the ease of old neighbors, snaked out of the breakfast tent which had started serving twenty minutes early. Some folks wore sportswear tops and shorts, like me. Many of the older folks wore perfectly matched polyester suits. And people of all ages, from infants in strollers to one elderly man in a wheelchair, wore traditional Dutch costumes. Ballooning black breeches and black caps on the men, with many different colorful shirts. Crisp white hats and lace and bibs for the women over many different bright styles and colors of dresses. Annika had explained that the styles and colors matched particular provinces in the Netherlands.

Brady wore a Dutch costume, of course, and with his blond hair and high cheekbones, he looked every bit the part. He glowed health and good looks from inside his booth which displayed at least a dozen huge glass jars full of Dutch licorice.

"Be sure you try the herring drops," Marion said as she came up beside me, Cam and Mitch not far behind.

"That sounds like fish poop," I said, "but I'm sure that's not what you mean."

The boys laughed, which I intended.

"Salted licorice fish," Marion said with a shove, "you outsider." She nodded toward Brady. "The van Peperstratens have been making the stuff for three generations. Rumor has it folks in the Netherlands actually import the Dutch licorice made here back there. Zoute Knoopjes, Dubbel Zoute, or if you prefer sweet black licorice, I like the white ones, Schoolkrijt."

We walked over to the long line at the breakfast tent, passing tables full of buttered ham buns, egg salad, some gray pasty thing labeled balkenbrij and red Jell-O dotted with sliced bananas.

"I suppose I should eat some of that too," I said pointing to the gray stuff.

“EEEEEEWWW!” both boys shouted, scrunching their faces.

“It’s good,” Marion said, her ample hips swinging through the crowd.

The boys shook their heads violently, and I winked. “I know who to believe.”

“Blessed be, Lonnie, just believe in yourself.”

Marion threw that remark like a paper airplane, but it caught me in a sensitive spot. In the spirit of the day, though, I decided not to respond.

“Star’s probably already got Orion in the tent,” Marion said. “Serving him the first olliebolen hot off the grill.”

A sudden clapping noise from behind us sounded like a team of Clydesdales had just entered the park, but when I looked, I saw a dozen young people in Dutch costumes with huge wooden shoes. Not the pretty decorated kind I’d seen in the gift booth, but bulky unpolished things. Their ankles bulged, and I remember someone telling me the dancers wore many pairs of socks to protect their feet.

“Klompers dancers,” Marion said.

I glanced at my watch, and at nine on the dot the dancers formed a circle and tinny music reminiscent of polka blasted from the onstage speakers. The kids bowed and klomped in perfect unison, swinging partners round and switching off in intricate patterns, sort of like square dance with a heavy-footed percussion element. Their five-minute sequence ended with an impressive Broadway-style kick line, wooden shoes head height in perfect unison. When the music ended and they bowed, I applauded as enthusiastically as everyone else.

“I’ll be they’re glad the heat broke,” I said. “Imagine the leg strength.”

As the line inched closer to the tent, I people watched. Peter and Ruth huddled together with Bishop Tappen near the cakewalk area. Peter and the Bishop, as usual, sported full clerical attire even on this fun day. I glanced down at my khaki shorts and polo and wondered if I really did make a good priest.

Alec helped his mother and a short black-haired man I assumed was his father in the Eleventh CLOSER lace booth. Many of the Belles goofed off throughout the park with their families. Jack sat at a big black electrical panel with about a zillion sliding controls, watching the stage intently. I even spotted Red Carson and Don Loomis, uniformed and pacing near the lemonade stand.

When Marion picked up her plate I stepped back. "I'm going to help the ladies with the kids, but you go ahead."

Marion's face fell. "You total chicken."

I laughed and held up my hands. "Salted licorice. Meat-filled pancakes. Buttermilk pop. Seriously, Mare. Today I just want Cap'n Crunch and a peanut butter sandwich." Though I had to admit the Jell-O and hambuns had looked good. I waved and jogged back to the kids' area. Isabella was finishing tying a ribbon to a blue helium balloon and handing it to a sad-sack clown already holding nearly twenty.

"Kitty thought we could give out balloons in the park, to the kids who can't come play," Isabella said.

"Good idea." I looked, but didn't see the crow-like senior warden anywhere.

"Father," the clown croaked, "you don't recognize me."

My jaw dropped and the taciturn old lady not only smiled, she guffawed. "I'm serious about this going well," she said, her tightness returning.

"And we so appreciate your dedication," came Star's voice from behind me.

That explained Kitty's sudden shift. Star approached, neat and professional in a dark grape suit with plunging neckline, snug straight skirt and perfect pumps. A demure gold cross shone between her breasts.

Beside her, a forty-something man with dark hair grayed at the temples and flashing blue eyes framed by funky rectangular plastic specs, stepped forward and offered a neat tanned hand. He wore jeans, spotless sneakers and a blue chambray shirt. As Kitty took his hand, I wished I had a camera.

"Chris Orion," the man said, shaking hands all around.

*Hoo-boy*, I thought. Any straight woman who had questions about whether this company ought to come to town would have no doubts once they got a look at him. Even I found him entertaining to look at.

"This is Reverend Lorraine Squires," Kitty said as Orion shook my hand. "One of our priests at Woman at the Well Episcopal Church. Right over there." She pointed out the church across the street.

Before a conversation could develop, Star took Orion's arm and whisked him away to admire the tulips. As soon as Kitty left with her balloons, Annika and Char nudged each other in quiet admiration of his butt.

"I'm outta here," I said. Jack had agreed to meet me at ten fifteen, and I wanted to hit the ladies room and have a moment or two to myself before things heated up. Even though I hadn't eaten anything suspect, my tummy jumped like someone was spinning rope around it.

In the parish house, Claris sat at her desk, doing nothing as far as I could see. "Hey," I said, "I thought you'd be out with the others."

She pressed a thin-lipped smile at me. "Just a bit slow waking up this morning," she said. Her eyes looked watery, searching, like she wanted something from me.

"Congratulations on Ruth and Alec," I said. "They seem like a wonderful couple."

She nodded. "Yes, well times have changed. A secret marriage. An unexpected baby. And you offer congratulations." She gave me the same watery look. "It's not like it used to be."

"No," I said, "and thank God for that. They are lucky to have you." I wondered how the Mansers had taken it.

"Have mercy on me, O God, according to your loving kindness. In your great compassion blot out my offenses," Claris said. "A model for living, right?"

"I suppose." I wasn't really paying that much attention. My brain raced ahead to meeting Jack and Red.

"It's God's compassion," Claris said, "kids these days, making

mistakes, and not suffering as badly as we had to for our offenses.” She stood and shrugged. “Peter always tells me I’m not very good at making Biblical references that make sense.”

“It makes sense,” I said. I wanted her to feel good and to make my escape. “Well, I—”

“Yes, it’s a good thing I’m not a priest!” She picked up her bag. “I’ve put some hot coffee in a carafe on your desk. I thought you might be in with the dog.” And finally she left.

I sat at my desk and opened the file of stuff I’d printed from Vance’s flash drive. The altered schematic drawing rested right on top, and I wanted it with me when Jack and I did our last inspection in fifteen minutes.

Downstairs, the reception area door closed loudly, and just as I folded the drawing, Star Hannes stomped into my office. She wasn’t carrying a shovel, but she looked mad enough to kill.

## Chapter Forty-four

“I have about one free minute, and I resent spending it addressing you,” she said, pointing that perfectly lacquered blood red nail at me.

“Then go.” I closed the file slowly.

“You had me investigated! You had my credit card purchases searched and saw to it that video footage of my shopping—doing my private shopping—was viewed by the police!”

“How did you—” I remembered. Deputy Don Loomis.

She stepped closer, and I leaned back against my desk. “Never underestimate the size and strength of my social and professional network. I have lived here for generations.”

Her eyes dropped to my desk, and I rested my hands on the closed file. “I’m sorry the police investigation upset you,” I said. “When I learned that you spent time alone at the mall, it brought your alibi into question. Especially since you had neglected to mention it.”

“But you—” She jabbed again with her finger. “You are the one who insisted they investigate me. Only me. Even though the three of us split for over an hour, I am the only one whose actions got investigated because you”—jab—“insisted.”

*Hold on.* I turned. “The three of you split up?” I thought only Star had gone out alone, leaving Mimi and Claris together.

Star waved her hand, exasperated. “Claris bought shoes, Mimi purchased a gown for a fall charity event, and I went to look at lingerie—in private.”

My brain raced. Mimi had no alibi? She’d been involved with Vance, but maybe he’d ended it. Maybe he’d threatened to reveal it. Maybe his use of the key had taken things too far and she wanted out. It would explain her continued allegiance to Star despite Vance’s murder.

“You had just better keep yourself under control today,” Star said, stepping back from me, “and maybe I won’t sue you for invasion of privacy. Or stalking. Or anything else I can think of. Do you understand?”

I nodded. God, I’d never considered Mimi. I hated to think one of the Belles could do something so heinous, but it fit. What if Vance had told her about Alec and Ruth, about his intention of exposing them? Might she have done it to help Alec? Or what if he threatened to expose his affair with her?

Star stalked out, and I stared after her, my brain swirling, stitches itching. I checked my watch. Just after ten. I had a few minutes before I would meet Jack. I needed help.

A minute later, I slid onto the old dark wood of a middle pew, gleaming now with Alec’s final polishing. The acrid scent of wood soap mixed with the flowers on the altar and the leftover aroma of humans sitting here decade after decade. The sanctuary felt cool and peaceful even though klomping and tinny music came from outside. The klompen dancers, at it again.

*I’m missing something, I prayed. When I was missing something before, that first summer, You showed me a soccer team, then a life, then a vocation. When my family fell apart, You gave me the Belles, a new family. Now, here, I’m missing something, some way to help this parish,*

*help Vance, help myself.*

*Help, help, help.*

Okay, I'd asked for help, but now I needed to work it out, just like moving a ball down the field. God helps those who help themselves.

So, the three women had split up at the mall. Mimi had no alibi and at least three really good reasons to kill Vance, maybe more. Mimi seemed quiet, always overshadowed by Star, but clearly she had enough power to scare Alec into keeping his marriage a secret. Maybe she even had a hand in helping Star set up the fake sabotage.

Klomp, klomp, klo-klomp.

I should call Red, tell her to check Mimi's credit cards. Maybe she— But she'd bought a gown. She had to have been at the mall.

Something juggled at the back of my mind. Something about shopping and deception and...I remembered. I sat up straight in the pew and stared at the empty pulpit. Alec had worked out a shopping scheme. Ruth purchased the stuff then Alec pretended to have bought it later, when he really spent his time doing other stuff with his wife. Had he learned that complex scheme from his mother? Had she done it to hide the time she spent with Vance?

Mimi could have bought the gown any time, kept it in the car, driven back, killed Vance, then met the others with her package in hand, pretending she'd just bought it. Easy.

I stood. "Thank you!" I shouted and it echoed off the walls the way I'd heard Alec's voice the day I met him. Almost ten fifteen, but I knew I stood a better chance of reaching Red if I called her than if I tried to find her out in that crowd, so I ran back across to the offices and grabbed my phone.

"You've got to check on something," I said as soon as she answered. "Right now."

"Kinda busy right now, Reverend," Red said, crowd noises in the background. "Where are you?"

"In church. I just found out the ladies all split, so you need to check the other one. There's a history there, something that goes

way back. Vance knew about it. She may have been trying to stop him from telling, from exposing her.”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

I’d been rambling. “Sorry.” I saw a movement from the corner of my eye, looked toward my door. Claris stood there, her hand raised as if she wanted to interrupt. I didn’t want her to hear my speculations about her new in-law.

“Meet me at the soundstage in two minutes,” I said and hung up. “Claris, I have to run.” I bounced on my toes, ready to dash across the park and put an end to this whole thing. I couldn’t believe it had taken me this long to put it all together. I hoped Alec would be okay when he found out the truth about his mom. But maybe he already knew.

“You look nervous, Reverend,” Claris said. “Did my coffee make you jittery?”

“No, no.” I stood in the doorway, hoping to usher her along with me to the park. “Just have something to take care of, that’s all.” I switched off the light. “Can we talk later?”

“Certainly,” she said, that same pressed smile appearing. “But actually, I need your help, if you could spare a minute.”

I tried to take a step, but she didn’t budge. “I don’t want to be rude, but really, I have to meet someone in about one minute. Can I help you after that?”

“Sorry, no,” she said, reaching into her purse. “It’s just that I need to do it now.” She looked at me. “You see, I need to confess.”

And before I could ask why or what for, she pulled an automatic pistol from her very sensible pocketbook and pointed it straight at me.

## Chapter Forty-five

*Gun. Gun gun gun gungungungun...* My brain couldn't process anything except the hole in the end of that gun.

"What's your favorite psalm, Reverend?" Claris closed the door behind her.

Two of us in this converted closet with the gun. *Gun.*

"Mine is Psalm Thirty-two," she said. "Do you know it?"

This felt like the worst seminary exam ever. "Hap—happy are those whose transgressions are forgiven?" My voice crackled against my throat, and my gaze stayed locked on that gun.

"Yes! And whose sin is put away. Happy are they to whom the Lord imputes no guilt."

*No guilt? She has a gun pointed at me.*

"I think it's the most soothing of all the psalms, perhaps of all scripture. I've memorized it, because in all these years, no matter how badly I felt, it promised forgiveness. Mercy embraces those who trust in the Lord, after all."

*All these years?* What was she talking about? And why did she have a gun? I risked a glance at her face open, pleading.

"I put away my sin, held my tongue, even though my bones withered away with the pain of it, it was worth it. For everyone's sake. Then that man brought it all back again."

My brain clicked so slowly and so hard I imagine Claris could hear it across the room. Not Star. Not Mimi. Claris. I had the means right, but the wrong woman. The woman who seemed to have no motive had killed Vance.

And attacked me.

This gave a whole new dimension to West Michigan nice.

The gun did not. Her hands were rock steady. I, on the other hand, thought I might collapse. I leaned sideways on the desk.

"Oh, dear, no," Claris said. "Is your head bothering you?"

I swallowed, tried to look cool. "Why did you attack me?" My voice sounded too wobbly for cool. Whatever had triggered that, I didn't want to do it again.

"Oh, that." She flapped her non-gun hand, sounding much cooler than me. "With the kerfuffle at the town meeting and all eyes on you, it seemed a nice opportunity to get rid of the shovel. Wipe it clean and hide it near your house."

"To frame me?"

She shrugged. "I just wanted to be rid of it. If you got framed or not, no real matter."

"Why me?"

"You aren't from around here. People might believe it of you and give up looking among us." She placed her purse on the guest chair. "It didn't work, though. You came out with that dog and nearly spotted me. I had to hit you." She tilted her head. "I'm so sorry. It's why I came and took care of you. I felt so badly."

The gun somehow got bigger and the room hotter the longer she had it pointed at me.

"In the end, of course, it seemed like providence. I hoped it would scare you off. I'd heard you earlier, on the phone, telling someone you had the files." She edged the gun toward me. "Did you show them to anyone else?"

I shook my head as the rest of my body trembled. "No one." I sure didn't want her going after Marion. I wanted her to put that gun down. "You know, Claris, you think I know something I don't. I have no idea why you killed Vance."

"Don't lie to me." Claris suddenly didn't sound like Claris anymore. She sounded sharp and angry. "I saw the file on your desk. Did you get it from him? No one else has seen it?"

I tried to remember everything in the file that mentioned Claris. "No one else."

"Good. You are my hiding place, oh Lord." She was quoting the psalm again. "For nearly forty years. But Vance ruined it."

I remembered the picture of the protest, a young Claris, grim-faced, fist-raised, protesting abortion only days after the *Roe versus Wade* decision.

*Do not be like horse or mule*, I heard, my addled brain still quoting Claris's favorite psalm, *which have no understanding*.

Quiet Claris, publicly protesting. The Claris I knew didn't do anything public, nothing to draw attention to herself. She preferred to work behind the scenes for her causes, for her husband. Yet there she was in the thick of it. People change, sure, but this seemed extreme. Why would she have been there?

My feet felt firm underneath me as understanding grew. She'd been there for the same reason that her friend Star Hannes always did everything in public. To be seen. To firmly plant an impression in everyone's mind. Claris clearly wanted one thing in everyone's mind: she was against abortion.

Why go public on that one thing? Why want everyone to know where she stood on that? Why quote that psalm, *you forgave me the guilt of my sin...you are my hiding place*?

I studied Claris, who watched me, gun steady.

*You are my hiding place. You preserve me from trouble*, the psalm said.

*Of course*. Claris had had an abortion. Before they were legal. She'd protested to hide it deep within her, to prevent anyone from ever questioning. And somehow, Vance had found out.

I covered my face with my hands. *Vance, you idiot*. Had he

approached her? Threatened to expose her? Maybe even used it to pressure her into influencing Peter to support the new congregation? It didn't matter now.

Poor Claris. If I were right, what a miserable time of it she must have had for the last forty years. An illegal abortion, so probably no counseling or support. Knowing Claris, she was probably driven to do it by some other dire consequence. A harsh family? Maybe just the social stigma was enough. If she'd had an abortion before it was legal, and people like Star knew about it, they surely wouldn't be friends now. Would Peter have married her?

Was he even the father?

That explained all that stuff she said earlier about times changing and Alec and Ruth not having to live with the same sorts of punishments she had. Her whole life had been a punishment, a running from guilt. She just knew that if it got out, she'd lose everything: her community standing, her husband, herself.

Actually, I understood that. It's why I wasn't out.

"So you see why I need confession." Gun unwavering, she reached into her handbag and pulled out a well-used leather-bound copy of the *Book of Common Prayer*. "Peter explained to me how all the church liturgies are organized," she said, balancing the book on the purse and flipping it open to the ribbon bookmark. "I found the reconciliation rite on my own." She handed it to me. "Don't know if you have one of your own here."

I owned about a dozen, of course, but she was right, I didn't have one here. I looked down at the start of the rite.

She sighed, moved her purse to the floor and sat. "It will be nice to get this off my chest." Her straight gray skirt stretched across her thighs and her pantyhose sagged slightly at the knees. She had on shiny new black flats. Sensible and stylish.

My brain still had trouble grasping that this woman had murdered Vance. "You were shoe shopping," I said. "Did you buy them in advance?"

She nodded enthusiastically. "Of course. That's where Ruth learned the scheme to use with Alec. Sometimes, you know, I just

needed quiet time, time away from the family, the church. Peter wouldn't have understood. So, now," she folded her hands primly in her lap, "I have come for the sacrament of reconciliation." She closed her eyes. "Have mercy on me, O God," she recited, "according to your loving kindness, in your great compassion blot out my offenses."

Her gun still pointed straight at my chest.

## Chapter Forty-six

She paused, opened her eyes. “You’re supposed to pray this part with me.”

“Wash me through and through from my wickedness, and cleanse me from my sin,” she continued. She shook the gun in my direction just once, then I joined her.

“For I know my transgressions only too well, and my sin is ever before me.”

“Claris, why are you doing this now?” I asked. “After years of silence, a murder to keep it quiet, an attack on me, why tell now?”

Annoyance burst into her face. “While I held my tongue, my bones withered away,” she said. “Psalm Thirty-two again.” She waved the gun. “Go on.”

My heart, which had already been racing at top speed, kicked it up a notch. My stitches thrummed.

“Holy God,” we said together, “Holy and Mighty, Holy

Immortal One, have mercy upon us.”

We paused. Claris bit her lower lip, sighed, and went on.

“Pray for me, a sinner.”

“May God in his love enlighten your heart,” I said, “that you may remember in truth all your sins and his unfailing mercy.”

Had she had some sort of religious experience? Confession was supposed to bring peace for a truly sorry person. Maybe she regretted her actions now, for the first time.

Then the voice inside me spoke up. *You won't be able to tell.*

Of course! If Claris confessed to me that she had an illegal abortion, murdered Vance and attacked me, I wouldn't be able to tell anyone. I couldn't violate a sacrament. If I did, I'd lose my ordination.

“The next part is yours,” Claris said, motioning with the gun toward the prayer book.

“How did you know I'd figured out it was you?” I asked, because of course, I hadn't. I'd thought it was Star or Mimi all along.

She narrowed her eyes but sighed. “The files, of course. Then, I came back for some extra tissue and I heard you on the phone telling that Officer Carson to check me out. I knew now was the time.”

“You had the gun with you?” That boggled my mind, the image of Claris McGavin in her sensible flats packing iron.

“Lately, dear, it's felt safer. When you have a gun, people listen to you.”

I couldn't argue that.

“I'm truly sorry about this, Reverend Squires.” The barrel of the gun looked wide and deep and black, and it did not waver in her hand. “Please go on.”

I read the priest's line, “May God, in his love, enlighten your heart, that you may remember in truth all your sins and his unfailing mercy.” *Help, help, help*, I prayed silently. “Amen.”

I felt my game brain settle down. *Okay*, the inner voice said, *there's a way out of this*. I just needed to figure it out. Just like getting boxed in on the field. Me and a line of defenders. Focus.

They've overlooked something. Though defenders in a soccer game never carried guns.

"Hear the Word of God to all who truly turn to Him." I skimmed ahead. Just a couple more lines, and we'll have gone too far. I'll be committed to the secrecy. I glanced at Claris. Her face was blank, eyes closed, waiting for peace.

"Come unto Me, all ye that travail and are heavy laden, and I will refresh you," I read. *Focus*, my game brain said. *Gun, gun, gun, gun*, some other part of my mind insisted. A desk, two chairs, a little end table, a lamp, some pens. How could I maneuver?

"Why did you stop?"

"It's the gun," I said, verbalizing my instinct's cry. "The gun. I can't. It invalidates the confession," I said quickly, "if I do it under duress."

Claris gazed at me, but that gun didn't move. "I should have thought of that. I'm sorry." Her eyes widened. "Oh, no problem. You shouldn't be standing there anyhow, should you?" The gun didn't move. "Sit beside me, here. You need to lay hands on me, don't you?"

I nodded slowly.

Pursing her lips in annoyance, Claris said, "My fault, of course. I began this all wrong." The gun didn't move. "Please, sit, scoot up beside me. We'll start again." She looked at the gun as if suddenly discovering it. "Oh!" She pulled it into her lap. "Please."

Her hand was still wrapped around the pistol's grip, so I rolled my desk chair across from her. We sat knee to knee, the door to my left, the end table beside her chair on my right.

Claris gently lay the gun on the table. "Now, Reverend, let's continue. We left off with *and I will refresh you.*"

Even I didn't have the rite of reconciliation memorized as well as she did. I stared at her hand. Her fingers tapped the nubby gray fabric of the old chair.

"Now," I began, "in the presence of Christ..." I couldn't get my hand to the gun more quickly than she. Could I tackle her, push her backward in the chair, then grab it?

“...and of me, His minister,” I continued. About three more lines and I was locked into secrecy. I shifted in my chair. If I kicked the table over, then dove after it, like playing goalie. I did that sometimes, for fun. Never for real. This was real.

“...confess your sins with a humble and...” My weight shifted. I could do this. *Help*. “... obedient heart to Almighty God, our Creator and our Redeemer!”

I shouted the last word and threw the prayer book hard at Claris’s face as I kicked the table flat. Then I rocked forward, diving after the gun. Claris jumped for it too.

“Holy God, heavenly Father!” Claris screamed as her feet kicked against mine. She was continuing with the rite. “You redeemed me from sin and death by the cross!” Her elbow caught me in the cheek, and I saw blue light in my right eye.

“Claris!” I yelled, falling against her with my shoulder. “Don’t!”

“You have established me among your children in the kingdom,” she said, jaw clenched. She smacked me again in the side of the head and the blinding lights flashed. She knew exactly what she was doing to my other wound. When I could see again, she stood by the door holding the gun.

“You can’t kill a priest,” I said gasping. “It’s an irredeemable sin.”

This was, of course, a lie, but one I hoped she’d believe.

## Chapter Forty-seven

Her face flushed, crushed with agony. “How do I find peace? How am I forgiven?”

I leaned against the side of the desk. “Please, let me call Peter, or Red Carson. We’ll get you all the help you need. Anyone you need.”

She glanced at me, then at the blank walls. “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them.”

Now she was quoting the Gospel of John. She had all the big texts on reconciliation memorized.

“Talk to the police,” I said, using the desk to pull myself slowly to my feet. “Then, I swear to you, I’ll give you confession. It will be all right.”

“Everyone will know. The town will judge me. And Peter.” For the first time, tears burst forth, but she did not sob. “Ruth. Now Alec. Their child.” She looked at the gun, looked at me. “They must all forgive me.” Her face lifted. “If they all forgive

me, I'll be free." She glanced at the ceiling, then back at me. "The whole town is already gathered."

She picked up her purse and backed out of the office, gun still straight on me. "They'll listen to me and forgive. Peter and Ruth will be freed from my sin as well. They'll listen." She kept backing. "Remember, Lonnie, this is loaded." Then she turned and ran down the stairs.

I picked up the phone, dialed Red's cell. She could tell the others, try to find Claris in the crowd. The man inside my head had returned, banging against the inside of my skull with a pickaxe. Red didn't pick up.

"It's Claris McGavin," I screamed. "She has a gun!" I hung up and checked my watch. It was just ten thirty. Time to give Orion the key to Middelburg. Claris would be headed for the stage.

Thank God decades of sports had taught me to run through almost any kind of pain. I shot across the street and through the park, dodging puddles of melted ice cream cones and families posing in Dutch costume, weaving between the members of the children's choir that had just left the stage. I couldn't see Claris or Red or Don Loomis anywhere. Lights began to flash in my head as I ran up to Jack, who sat on his elevated control platform.

"Lonnie! It worked. It's all there. We couldn't find you, but Red saw it too. Your plan worked."

On stage, Star Hannes led Christopher Orion and Mayor Roosevelt to the center. The mayor carried a four-foot long papier-mâché key painted gold.

"Do you see Claris?" I puffed, willing my vision to stay clear.

Jack held up a finger so I'd wait, then did something to his board. He leaned down. "I decided last night to protect myself, so I put that light, the one they rigged to explode, I put it on an independent switch. They wouldn't know, would still rig it, but I can switch it off just before Star turns on her mike."

The mayor began to wax political about the glorious day and civic gathering.

"But can you see Claris from up there? Claris McGavin?"

Jack looked puzzled, but scanned the crowd. “No, no.” He leaned back down again. “Red said it was a good thing I did, because this way, Star can still trigger it, and we’ll watch her reaction. It’ll help prove if she’s involved or not.”

He sat up and shifted another lever. The stage brightened. “Hey,” he said. “*She’s* not scripted on stage. She doesn’t have a mike.”

My stomach slumped. I knew before I looked that Claris was onstage. As I ran I watched her move close to the indignant Star and whisper something. Star’s hard, self-assured face melted into a whirl of terror.

The mayor stuttered a bit in his speech, but kept on. “And just as May promises the bounty of future harvests...”

I threw myself over the front of the stage and walked up to Claris. God love him, the mayor kept right on pontificating. Star’s eyes followed me, pleading. Claris held her pocketbook at her navel, her other hand in it, right next to Star’s back. The crowd probably wondered about the commotion, but couldn’t really see anything wrong.

“Please, Claris,” I said as quietly as I could.

Claris’s wide eyes bounced from the crowd to me to the mayor to the crowd again. “I have to. For my family.”

Orion looked perfectly collected, if a little confused, watching me.

“Now give me your microphone,” Claris said to Orion.

“Yes, ma’am,” he said and unclipped the mike and power unit from his tie and belt.

Claris opened the purse to provide a glimpse of the gun. “My hands are full, Lonnie. Could you please pin it on me?” I did.

“And though he has spent the day getting to know you, it’s time you get to know him,” Mayor Roosevelt said, glancing our way.

“I’m going to speak,” Claris said, regripping the gun. “And you”—she grabbed Orion’s arm—“will come with me. Then they’ll listen.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Orion said, face unmoving.

I thought about Claris confessing all this to the entire town and glanced at the crowd. Red Carson appeared next to a stack of speakers and caught my eye. She tapped her cell and nodded, then tapped her gun.

Lovely, I thought, but what help can she be? Claris will start talking, and depending on how the crowd reacts or the next crazy thing that pops into her head, no telling what she'd do. What if she'd also memorized passages about Abraham sacrificing Isaac to ensure God's love?

Mayor Roosevelt walked toward us, reaching around to snap off his mike. Too bad his didn't explode. The distraction would help.

That gave me an idea.

"Claris," I said as she pulled Orion forward. "Stand beneath the third light from the end, see? That's the place where Jack has a spotlight set."

She followed my point and nodded. "Thank you, Reverend, for helping me."

"What the hell is going on?" Star whispered as they walked forward. "I'm having you arrested after—"

"Give me your mike," I said.

Star's eyes widened, and she clasped her hand over it protectively.

"You want to talk?" I said, "use the mayor's. Give me yours."

"It's not that. It's adjusted," Star stuttered. "It's set to—for me."

So she *was* in on the sabotage. Too bad I didn't have time for a victory dance. "I know what will happen when it gets turned on. Give me the mike or we all might die."

The mayor, color suddenly drained from his face, reached out and yanked the power pack from Star's waist. "Here." He thrust it into my hands and reached for her cleavage.

"Hello, everyone. My name is Claris McGavin."

I held the mike and power pack in front of me and looked out to catch Jack's eye. He stood on his chair, hands over his eyes. I lifted the mike slightly and he shook his head. It was off. *Please,*

*help*, I prayed, nodding my head slowly. After a beat, Jack nodded and gave me a thumbs-up.

*Help, help, help*, I prayed. I was going to explode a can light on top of a multi-millionaire, the most important visitor to Middelburg in a hundred years, and a crazy woman with a gun.

"When I do this," I whispered to Star, "take the mayor and run like hell."

"But what about Orion?" she asked.

"Just do it!" I stepped slowly toward Claris and Orion who stood together on the stage. I wanted to be closer so when the surprise came I'd be sure to tackle her. Or rescue him. Whichever seemed more important.

"As you know," Claris told the crowd, "I've lived here all my life, married, worked here, raised my child here."

Step. Another step. I glanced at the crowd and saw Red's partner moving forward along the edge of the crowd. I didn't look at Red because I didn't want Claris to see.

"I've never spoken in public like this before." Claris gripped and regripped her purse with her one hand, the other still stuck inside. "And I appreciate you all listening to me just for a few minutes before we go on with the presentation."

She looked over at me. "Lonnie? What are you doing?"

"Are you sure, Claris?" One last time, I thought, one last try to talk her down. "Star can do this if you're having second thoughts."

I heard a few murmurs from the people in the closest rows. I took another step and Claris's face twisted.

"I am doing this!" Claris shouted and she pulled the gun from her purse.

I switched the mike power button on. "Help!" I shouted as white and orange light banded from the rigging above. I dropped the mike and dove as Claris and Orion stumbled apart. Blue smoke peppered my eyes and hot sparks flew and my legs pumped like I had only seconds for the final score. I jumped, feet first, into a slide tackle, aiming for her ankles instead of the familiar black-and-white ball. My hip then elbow hit the stage's smooth floor,

and I saw Claris level the gun at me just as I hit her ankles and she fell, gun first, toward me. Another bang, more flashing light, and I fell deep into darkness.

## Chapter Forty-eight

Just a little before noon, I sat slouched in Peter's office chair at the church, a huge plastic bag of ice on my head. Marion sat on the desk, clucking and checking her watch. Bishop Tappen stood in front of a bookshelf, hands clasped behind his back, studying Peter's collection. Red had just closed a notebook and stood.

"This is the first time I've ever seen you take notes," I said. I looked at Marion. "This thing is freezing. Can I take it off now?"

"Another minute," she said and gave me the evil eye. "Don't move it."

"There's a lot to remember," Red said. "You sure you don't want to go to the hospital?"

I shook my head gingerly. "No. I just hit it on the stage when Claris landed on me."

"One hell of a slide tackle," Marion said. "I heard you broke both her ankles."

I grimaced. "Not what I meant to do."

"You stopped her," Red said. "A risky and brave thing."

Brave? I smiled. *Hear that, Aunt Kate? Brave.*

"You've taken a lot of risks, withholding information from me." Red glanced toward the bishop. "We'll talk about the details later."

"Will Reverend Squires be going to jail?" the bishop asked without turning.

We all looked at Red. "I'm pretty sure not. Just a whole lot of questions to answer."

I'd told her everything I'd learned about the case as soon as I'd woken up. Everything, that is, except three things. I honored Alec's decision to conceal his mother's affair. I skimmed over the details of Vance's notes. And I didn't mention my suspicions about Claris's illegal abortion motivating her attack on Vance. She'd confessed to that crime and would be punished enough. If she wanted to reveal the secret she'd kept for so long, that was up to her. I pretended not to know her motive.

"How's it going outside?" I asked.

"Ice off now, for five minutes," Marion said, taking the cool, wet bag from me.

"Mostly settled now, I think," Red said. "Some people think they saw a gun, some people think they didn't. A whole lot of people think you saved Claris's and Orion's lives when you pushed them out of the way of the explosion."

"Small-town hero strikes again," said Marion.

"And Star Hannes, of course"—Red rolled her eyes—"has an explanation for it all."

"Does she?" I flexed my hands to warm them.

"She's actually taking credit for the whole thing," Marion said. "Denny told me when he brought the ice. She's claiming she had the rewiring done for security purposes. That she and Jack had the whole thing planned, just in case. She even shook his hand in front of a crowd and congratulated him on helping to save the day."

"No way," I said. I didn't know whether to throw up or

laugh.

“Way,” said Red and Marion together.

“So far, Jack’s going along,” Red said. “Makes him a hero. Otherwise, he’s a dupe.”

“Star does it again,” I said.

“Well, I gotta head out,” Red said. “I’ll call you.”

“Here, wait.” Marion jumped up and grabbed a sack from a stack her husband had brought down with the ice. “Take some pastries. I had leftovers when things broke up early.”

Red took the sack and left. Marion glanced at the bishop, who hadn’t moved. “You can have some too, if you like, Your Reverence.”

He looked at her with his best long-suffering gaze. “I’d like that. Thank you.”

Marion sat down on the desk beside me, ignoring the awkward silence.

“Do you think I could speak to Lorraine alone?” the bishop said, smoothing his pectoral cross against his purple shirt.

Marion looked at me, and I nodded. She grabbed the ice. “I’ll just freshen this up,” she said as she left.

The bishop turned to face me. “Reverend McGavin is taking an immediate and indefinite leave of absence.”

“That’s best.”

“Can you preach and preside tomorrow? Or must I?” His face drooped.

I sat up straighter. “I’d be happy to.” Assuming my head stopped banging long enough for me to stand for an hour plus.

“I’m meeting with the parish leaders later tonight to discuss placing them under diocesan oversight. I’ll assign a supply priest for the weeks to come.” His tone made it clear he found it a great bother.

*They’ll hate that.*

“You’ll be free to head home next week,” he said.

*Home.* Did I even have one? No job. No partner. Hell, she was having my stuff moved to some new place I’d never seen. Still, where else could I go? Move in with my parents?

I shuddered, and the bishop looked worried. "I'm grateful for your bravery in the civic arena of course." He gave a little bow. "But the parish seems unimproved."

"Unimproved?" Was he blind? I pointed out the cooperation at the kids' play area. "They're actually speaking civilly to each other." He seemed unimpressed. "In fact, before disaster struck, Reverend McGavin told me this morning that he actually supported the parish split. It's not reconciliation, but it is improvement."

His bushy black eyebrows waggled. "That seems a giant backward step."

I stole a line from Peter. "But they'd live peacefully in the same community."

He shook his head. "I want one parish. It's better for resources. Still..." He nodded, a gesture clearly calculated to transmit reassurance. "I will attempt to find some way to support your quest for the job at St. Gregory's."

I wasn't sure I wanted that anymore. Before, it had been the only chance, the only open window in the confines of my life. Somehow, by collapsing, my life had opened up. St. Greg's mattered less than all the things I might do, the places I might go.

"Look who I found looking for you!" Marion sailed through the door carrying a new bag of ice and leading Christopher Orion. Star followed about three paces behind with an unbecoming scowl.

"Reverend Squires," Orion said, approaching me with a big smile and firm handshake. "I can't thank you enough for what you did today."

"I'm glad to see you haven't run screaming from town because of it," I said.

"I've explained," Star said, "that this sort of thing never happens here."

"But it did," Orion said to her, and she clammed up. He turned back to me. "And frankly, I'm glad it did." He sat on the desk where Marion had been. "I'd begun to get a little creeped

out, you know? Like the whole place was a little too Stepford Wives.”

If Star and the bishop hadn’t been standing there, I would have burst out laughing. As it was, I purposely avoided meeting Marion’s gaze and chewed my lip.

“But,” Orion continued, “a little drama, a little gunplay, and a superhero clergy detective, and I have to say, I really like the place.”

Behind him, Star looked sick.

“I’m no superhero detective,” I said, prepared to confess that I’d had it all wrong until Claris exposed herself.

“False modesty gets you nowhere in this world,” Orion said. “And you, sir,” he turned to the bishop, “are so lucky to have a priest like this working for you. And the town is so lucky to have her here. It adds healthy diversity to the place.”

My nerves prickled. Me and diversity in the same sentence always made me nervous.

“Though given so much else seems so conservative,” Orion said, “I’m not sure why she stays. You are all so lucky.”

Star looked like she’d spit nails if she could, then smiled at Orion. “Lucky.”

Voices came from down the hall, and Jack, Isabella and Kitty Gellar walked in together. Kitty still wore her sad clown garb. Isabella had had her face painted with fairy wings. Jack handed Marion a big thermos. My chest expanded. I just loved these people. They showed off what a great place this could be.

“Bishop Tappen,” Kitty said, clasping the man’s hand. “So nice to meet you here.”

“We’ve been talking, an unofficial meeting of sorts,” Jack said.

“So we could make the best use of your time this evening,” Kitty said.

“We wanted to make sure Lonnie was okay, though,” Isabella said. “How’s your head?”

“That’s five,” Marion said, handing me the ice.

“Cold,” I said holding the ice against my new bump.

“As senior warden of the parish,” Kitty said, “I’m proud to tell you that the leaders of the breakaway group and I have formed a proposal to reunite the church on a trial basis.”

I nearly dropped the ice. “Really?”

“We got to talking as we cleaned up the duck pond,” Isabella said, “after Jack finished with the police.”

“Since Reverend McGavin clearly cannot continue as rector,” Kitty said, her voice haughty as ever despite the baggy black suit and bright red carnation in her lapel, “we suggest that Reverend Squires be invited to serve as our interim rector for a period of several years.”

*Whoa! What?*

Marion grinned and slapped my bicep. Orion nodded. Star truly looked like she might lose her meat-filled pancake and Olliebollen breakfast.

“Of course,” Kitty said before the bishop could respond, “we must discuss this with the full vestry and yourself, but with the parish recombining while we discuss our future, our resources will again be consolidated, and giving will, of course, increase.”

As I watched the bishop consider this, I realized that having Kitty Gellar on my side could be a very good thing. But Lord help me if I ever did anything to have her as an enemy.

Then I realized I was thinking like the rector of Woman at the Well parish. When had I decided I wanted to stay here?

“I don’t know the history of the parish, of course,” said Orion, “but anything that keeps Reverend Squires in town can only be a good thing,” Orion said. “My family has been a small-town-church-going family for generations, but we’ve struggled to find the right community. My eldest son, he’s sixteen and not always *included*.” He emphasized the word.

“There are many churches in Middelburg that would be delighted to include him,” Star said, totally missing the point.

“Glad to hear you’ll welcome him, Councilwoman. He only recently came out to us, and still struggles. I’d also like him to talk to you, Reverend Squires.”

I smiled, both flattered and panicked. *Don’t imply I’m gay*, I

willed him. *Don't.*

"Your son?" Star asked, a beat behind.

"Is there a problem?" Orion asked.

Everyone in the room stared at Star. "No, certainly not, of course. People of faith. Welcome."

"Glad to hear we can count on civic support," Orion said. "That's crucial to my decision about relocation, of course."

Star's eyes widened, but the rest of her face froze in a smile. "Certainly. Absolutely."

I saw Jack and Isabella stare at each other in wonder. I dared not look at the bishop. He knew this guy was as rich as everyone in this parish combined.

"I'm willing to consider your proposal," the bishop said to Kitty, and we all knew it was a done deal. Jack hugged Kitty, high-fived Isabella then offered me his hand.

"Keep the ice on your head," Marion said as I leaned forward. "You're a Middelburgian now, so I guess this calls for a celebration." She twisted open the thermos, and a pungent, sour smell flooded the office. My stomach flopped. The bishop stepped back, and Orion screwed up his face.

"What is that heinous smell?" Orion asked.

Marion poured a steaming mug full of thick yellowish liquid and handed it to me, then showed me the label on the thermos. *Buttermilk pap*. So that's how you spelled it.

"Want some?" Marion asked, and Orion backed away in mock horror.

I stared at it, willing my stomach not to let the sour odor get to it.

"Go on," Marion said. "Try it. Nectar and ambrosia to us Dutch folk." I hesitated. "You're not chicken, are you, Reverend Superhero Detective?"

Everyone watched the way they watch the kid on the playground who has pledged to eat a live worm.

"Guess your aunt was right. You are a chicken." Marion reached to take the mug.

I grabbed it back, and my eyes fell automatically to my watch.

But then, I didn't care what time it was. Here's to you, Aunt Kate, I thought as I raised the mug to them all. "Very nice," I said and began to drink.



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