

ONE

*Tremble, old man, at your ruler's wrath
That you provoked, there is no remedy.
This outburst was fatal for you.*

—COUNT MONTERONE AND CHORUS, ACT ONE

The child was not schooled in the hangman's knot. It certainly wasn't the sort of instruction covered in Sister Benedict's grade five class. The Sisters of the Perpetual Soul taught their fifty-six charges to live in peace with God and offered what the Mother Superior called a diamond education: reading, writing, arithmetic and religion. More's the pity, for it took her a long time to die. Gasping, kicking and scratching at the smooth leather belt that, in the end, was just tight enough.

THE CASKET DISAPPEARED INTO THE GRAVE, SUNLIGHT STUBBORNLY STREAKING OFF its small brass nameplate. *Sweet Jesus, no!* Constable Patrick Painter's stomach lurched and he gulped for air. He tasted salt water, seaweed and cedar. For an instant, he fled Holy Trinity's graveyard by the sea and gratefully felt the nearby Pacific Ocean's cool, wet touch on his face. Memories of beach-bumming and cove-hopping sliced his consciousness as the red Coast Guard vessels winked at him from Patricia Bay. As a child, he'd been terrified of losing his mother. Every night he'd say, "See you in the morning, Mom," a childish command, he now realized. A desperate effort to receive a promise of not being left alone...with him. He'd wait as long as possible to shut his eyes, rubbing the soft sheets, to avoid the risk of sleeping and her dying. Each morning, he would awake with a start. Then he'd leap out of bed, dash into the hall and listen for her soft voice. Only when he heard it could he relax. Sometimes he thought his bladder would burst, but finally he'd hear her, then he would race into the bathroom.

The beeping of the pager startled the small clutch of mourners just as his father reached down to grab a handful of freshly-dug dirt. *Goddammit! What the fuck?* Flushed, Constable Painter peered up under dark bangs and caught the priest's critical glance. A disapproving clucking of tongues slipped its way round the circle of onlookers. Cursing inwardly again, he instinctively slapped his side and the short, nasal bursts stopped. Patrick looked away, eyes skittering from the moss-pocked tombstones, to the round earth mound, to the grave pit—*Oh my God, Mom!*—finally, up into his father's black and staring eyes. The younger Painter knew, with the last sudden, sublime finality that strikes a driver careering off a bridge, that the horror was true. He was alone with the man he loathed.

Leonard P. Painter opened a large hand and a clump of Vancouver Island soil plopped onto his wife's coffin. A long, ragged scar gleamed on his left cheek, contrasting sharply with his ruddy complexion. The recently retired staff sergeant of the Victoria Police Department turned carefully on his heel and tramped away. Several mourners struggled to follow, shoulders hunched with grief. Breathing deeply, Patrick waited while the others followed suit. A small,

well-dressed man arrived breathless and late, offered condolences and an envelope, which Patrick shoved unthinkingly into his suit pocket.

Finally, only he and the priest remained. Patrick knew he'd deliberately left the beeper on. What was he hoping for? That he'd have to leave and so avoid the nightmare? *My God, Pat, you'd run from your own mother's funeral? You'd use the damn job excuse on her one last time?* Despite himself, he snorted.

"Patrick?" A hand touched his shoulder. "Son, you all right?"

Painter blinked into the sun. "What? Oh, yeah. My mother's dead and if I were any better, I'd be twins."

"What?" The priest's sunken eyes stared. "Patrick, maybe we should—"

Marching off to his car phone, Constable Painter didn't hear the rest.

SHE STRUGGLED BUT COULDN'T GRASP AIR. VOICES OF UNATTAINABLE BEAUTY ROSE round her like a shimmering fountain: lyric and mezzo sopranos rushed skyward, chased by a single clear treble. An astonishingly brilliant light enveloped her. Glowing faces and flowing robes darted across her path. Tempest Ivory inhaled profoundly, right from her toes; still no sound escaped her lips. She had to sing. She must!

The voices scaled atmospherically, forcing Tempest's hands over her ears. Ugly and sharp now, the bizarre harmonies jarred her. With a crackling whoosh, the light swallowed all the air. The unknown choir rushed at her like sheets of rain, their piercing shrieks pummelled her and she collapsed, trembling and gasping. Her soul shrivelled and she sobbed for her loss. A ringing crammed her skull and she woke with a gasping, heaving shudder.

Sunlight caressed her as she slowly began reattaching herself to her cool satin sheets, her cannon-ball bed, her tiny cottage in pastoral North Saanich, British Columbia. The phone rang again. Her heart still thudded, though her breath returned in frayed whispers. A ragged clank raised the coppery hair on her freckled arms. She wasn't alone. Tempest bolted up, started screaming, "Get outta my house!" and stumbled out of and around her bed into her living room.

A dark, hooded figure streaked from the galley kitchen into the narrow hall. Two strides to the front door. Too tortoise-like to follow, Tempest unhinged her jaw, dug back into her spine and unleashed her only weapon. Her voice rose, effortlessly vaulting high C, saturating the tiny space, slamming the intruder's senses. The figure stubbed its toe near the front door. With a surprised bellow, the prowler reached down, clutched the offending box and hobbled out into the dappled light. Chest heaving in her lace nightgown, Tempest thumped barefoot onto her wooden porch. Just as her motorbike was thrown to the ground, she saluted the interloper with an angry, raised fist as he faded into the surrounding second-growth coniferous forest. Though incapable of physically describing her uninvited guest, Tempest could mentally replay the baritone's startled curse.

Two

*Oh, such pain! What can
Such bitter tears from*

—GILDA, ACT ONE

Patrick Painter gaped at the long, slim shadow cast by the horror dangling in the closet and pondered the irony of life. This prickling in his soul, this stinking hot terror rippling up his spine, was the only emotion Patrick shared with his father: an abject incapacity for enduring a child's violent death. Fully trained and hardened by countless pulpy masses of human roadkill on British Columbia highways, Patrick felt his testicles shrink as he collapsed inward from the strain. Forcing a quick, wild-eyed stare, he glimpsed tousled cinnamon hair, bulging eyes, a sagging, blackened tongue and a blue jumper. Holding his breath as if it would explode on release, he backed out of the dormitory.

"For the love of...can we not...?" Patrick whirled to see a small, gray woman peering up at him. At least, she seemed completely gray, with her hair curled in silver waves, an oversized charcoal button-up sweater around her shoulders, and an ash-coloured skirt around her waist. "Patrick!"

Constable Painter hesitated, then reached down and gave her an awkward hug. "Hello, Aunt Winifred," he started then stopped, tongue foolishly large in his mouth.

"Dear boy, thank heavens it's you!" Her small body hummed with energy. "Now we have a modicum of chance for some control." Winifred coughed slightly. Patrick knew she would try to control him so he steeled himself, as he always did when faced with the tiny punch of Catholic fury that was his great-aunt.

"This whole thing's so unfortunate. I was worried, you see, what with the school..." She stopped, noticing his reaction. A faint blush rose on her hollow cheeks. "Oh....dear, please forgive me." She tugged her sweater closed, then lightly touched his shoulder as though afraid it was on fire. "You know I wanted to be there for your father, but..." she hesitated, eyes suddenly dark. "This is such a disaster. First your mother, now this. Your poor father, he must be devastated. I should, must, go to him. He'll be so despon—"

"He's fine," Patrick replied too harshly. *I've just come from my Mom's funeral on my damn birthday and you ask about him!* He swallowed, put on his best officious voice and tried again. "I'm here—".

"It's obvious why you're here, dear boy," she said, her nasal tone mocking his. "The Lord seems to have forsaken us on this day of Saint Patrick's. Now, this is what I want you—"

Patrick tried again, fighting against the internal barrage of inadequacies that his great-aunt commonly evoked. "Sorry, Sister. I'm here to investigate—"

"Investigate?" Her nostrils flared. "Nonsense! The poor child had an accident. Simple as that." She clapped her hands for effect. "No need for more dramatics." She took a short step toward the dormitory. "Now, tell that hulking two-by-four of a man to get her down, then

follow me!” The aforementioned hulk shifted across the doorway and rolled his eyes at Painter. Sister Winifred silently marched down the empty hall.

“Can’t do that, I’m afraid.” Realizing she was gone, he raised his voice. “Aunt Winifred? Uh, Sister?” He cursed and nodded curtly to his colleague. The other cop looked away, hiding a grin.

Patrick hurried after her and found his great-aunt waiting at the top of a curved staircase. “Snap to it, Patrick. We’ve got lots to do.”

She nipped down the stairs. Patrick clumsily followed. “Like I said, we can’t touch her.”

The nun stopped, leaned on a huge newel post and turned slate eyes up at him. “Can’t touch her? You mean you’re going to just let...” Her eyes swept up and down the stairs and she lowered her voice. “Come along. We’ll discuss it in my office.”

Feeling like an altar boy again, Patrick followed her along another echoing corridor into a small room painted avocado green.

“Sit!” He did so, on a high, straight-backed chair. Winifred moved around a large wooden desk, perched neatly on a swivel chair and began straightening the few papers on the otherwise spotless desk. “Now, what’s this foolishness about waiting? We can’t let the poor child hang there, surely?”

“Sorry, but it’s procedure. Coroner’s got to come, certify death.”

“Certify...” the nasal voice hesitated. “But that’s ridiculous.”

Finally, he had the upper hand. Checkmate for officialdom.

It had only taken him ten minutes to drive south along the winding West Saanich Road but in that short time, Patrick had been fully briefed by his boss, Staff Sergeant Lalande. “Miserable day for you, ain’t it, da Vinci? And Wilma says it’s your birthday. Sucks rocks, don’t it?” Painter swerved to avoid a tractor and heard the wheeze on the line as Lalande took another nicotine drag. “Sorry to call you out, but Williams is having a root canal—serves him right, the crap he eats—” This commentary was punctuated by a fit of coughing. “—and Evanovich is doing radar on Mount Newton. I’ll be there soon’s I can get out of the council meeting. Now, watch your mouth, my boy. The school seems a bit out of the twilight zone, if you know what I mean—uniforms, prayers, that sort of nonsense—but the nuns’re first class.” Little do you know, thought Patrick. Another long, hissing breath and Patrick jumped in. “What’s happened?”

“Wilma didn’t tell ya?” Without waiting for an answer, he continued, “Some kinda accident. Got a 911 call from Sister Winifred, the Mother Superior. A kid’s dead at the Old Soul. She wouldn’t say more. Now listen, Painter, this’s gonna be a stinker. Don’t matter if it’s an orphan or rich kid who bought it. The press’ll eat it up. Your job is damage control. Get in there and nail it down. Coroner’s on her way. I’ll get there soon’s I can.”

“Thanks,” Patrick said as he wheeled the cruiser, a Taurus sedan, up the long, forested drive.

“And da Vinci?” his boss’s husky voice boomed. “Watch your back. Those nuns answer to a higher calling, and I don’t mean our local mayoral might.”

You’re not kiddin’, Patrick thought as he stepped out, adjusted his hat and looked heavenward.

The Academy of the Sisters of the Perpetual Soul, built circa 1896, rose three storeys, capped by a copper-roofed bell tower and gold cross which ascended like a gleaming pulpit into the North Saanich sky. Built in red brick and highlighted by rows of domed windows and neo-classical details like pilasters and a pedimented gable roof, the academy sat on fifteen rolling and forested acres. The Perpetual Soul was founded by early Quebec missionaries dedicated to the education of rural children, and grew to become the institution of choice for many of Victoria's elite Catholic families. In keeping with its charitable founding ethic, however, the academy provided free education to a limited number of deserving girls. At the academy and other Catholic schools, education was paramount, personal comfort secondary. Cold and austere from the outside, the Old Soul's interior remained crypt-like, with gleaming oak floors, dove-gray walls and endless, senseless echoes.

"Her full name?" Patrick asked, shifting in the small chair.

"What? Oh, Amelia, uh, Angeline I believe, Penderghast." She reached down. Patrick heard a drawer open and shut. Winifred carefully placed a small gold chalice directly in front of her. "Now, I've got quite a lot to do," she said, lifting the lid. She reached in, took something small and popped it in her mouth. She chewed for a moment, swallowed and sighed. Winifred dipped the cup toward him. It was filled with jujubes, mostly green. Patrick almost laughed. He'd forgotten his great-aunt's fancy. "Have one, a green one," she directed. He reached in, deliberately fingered a red one, then did as ordered. Her eyes darted sharply to the cup and she ate two yellow jujubes in quick succession. She began to scribble. "Now, we've got to do damage control." Patrick choked, swallowed the whole candy. "First, alert the archdiocese—heaven knows what they're going to say—next, head off the press. You know the kind of trash they'd write if given half a—"

Patrick finally regained his breath. "Could you spell the last name?"

"Pardon?" she said in mid-chew.

He swallowed hard, the jujube burning deep in his throat. "The girl's last name."

"The girl? Oh, of course." She did.

"Age?"

"Eleven, I think." Winifred slid the lid back on the chalice and slipped the cup into the drawer. "Right," she said. "If you'll just..." Painter didn't move. "Well?" she asked finally. "What else do you want?"

"Have you informed her parents?"

Sister Winifred's slate-coloured eyes widened. "Of course not! I, I wanted to prepare. You don't just call someone up out of the blue and..." Sister Winifred leaned back into her chair and stared at Painter. Stroking the silver cross around her neck, she continued, "I don't really know what to do. The archdiocese, well, we've never had..." She paused, then leaned forward. "You see, this is my school. At least it was this morning. Heaven only knows what the bishop's been told now." Her brow furrowed at the thought. Patrick was relieved that there was someone his great-aunt feared. "Here we do things a certain way. My way. Have done for almost fifteen years. For us, religion is essential. We believe that the basics can be nourished and built in at an early age. We teach the girls to respect the person, the environment and our value system. It must have been an accident. How else...?" Winifred blew her cheeks in and out, like paper sails turning in the wind. "First I've got to deal with the bishop."

“That’s fine. We’ll contact the parents. You have an address?”

“Of course,” she replied and pulled a black address book from another drawer. “Her mother’s name is Alice, she lives on Finnerty. Here it is.”

Patrick jotted down the name, address and phone number. “You seem to know her pretty well.”

“I know all my girls, Constable Painter, and their parents and often their siblings. We don’t just teach religion in the classroom. It’s a way of life, and needs the work of the whole family unit. When these girls leave the Perpetual Soul, they’re trained to be proficient individuals, good Christians and independent citizens. Take an interest is what we do here at the Perpetual Soul.”

Is that what you do? Patrick thought. What about your own family? But he merely asked, “No Mister Penderghast?”

She shook her head. “Amelia’s father abandoned her and her mother years ago.”

“What does Mrs. Penderghast do? Must be something pretty special to afford the Old, pardon me, the Perpetual Soul.”

The gray eyes hardened. “Amelia is, was, one of our special scholars.”

“Oh, yeah, some of ‘em get a good Catholic education for free. What did she or her mom have to do to deserve that?”

His great-aunt glared at him. “Nothing! Each year, the archdiocese chooses two worthy girls from the local community. Their education is completely paid for, provided, of course, they suit.”

“Suit?”

The Mother Superior’s answer was interrupted by a knock. A young nun padded softly into the room. “Yes, Sister Gabriel?”

The young Sister nodded toward Painter. He turned. For a second, she hesitated, then Patrick felt her withdraw. She quickly crossed herself. He was so struck by her brilliant green eyes that he almost missed her soft words. “The coroner has descended upon us, Mother.”

“DEATH BY STRANGULATION, NOT THE SLIGHTEST DOUBT.”

“Any idea when?” asked Patrick, carefully averting his eyes from the tiny figure being zipped into the body bag.

“At a guess, sometime early this morning,” replied Dr. Edwina Harwicke. “I’ll know more after the autopsy.

“Right,” she said to her assistant, “off you go.”

“Was it—?”

“Suicide? You can say the word, Constable. Most likely. Very unusual in children but not unheard of. No note found, but that’s not uncommon, contrary to popular belief.” Edwina sighed and rubbed her eyes. “Not a very good knot. She struggled, poor dear, but no sign of another person. All I can tell you is how,” she said, zipping up her small bag. “You have to find out why.” Dr. Harwicke gave the cracked leather an affectionate pat. “At least she won’t drown.”

“Excuse me?”

“Oh, sorry. Just an expression.” In answer to his blank look, Edwina continued, “If you’re born to be hanged, then you’ll never be drowned.”

PATRICK WAS GETTING TIRED. WHERE IN GOD'S NAME—*NOW THAT'S APPROPRIATE*—was Lalande? With the assistance of the school's counsellor, Dr. Tempest Ivory, who, despite her unusually loud voice, he decided could counsel him anytime, he'd interviewed most of the staff and students. From the jumble of distracted voices and continuous comings and goings of distraught parents, he managed to cobble together a day in the life of Amelia Angeline Penderghast, or Pendy, as her sobbing, red-headed friend, Vita, called her. Early for bloody everything, was how he'd put it in the report. Up at six for mass (why did the Lord always expect such early devotion?), breakfast from seven till seven-thirty, followed by a half hour of chores—poor Pendy would never finish polishing the altar votive candles—and then an hour of free play time until classes began at nine.

"Nine sharp!" little Vita Bell had intoned. "Mustn't be late or Sister Dick—" She grinned nervously and tugged at her blue jumper. "Sister *Benedict* made you go up to the front of the class and read the daily missive out loud." She spoke with such reverence that Patrick's nape hairs jumped to attention. Vita raced pudgy fingers through her bronze ringlets. "I never had to, but—" whereupon she'd burst into tears again and Dr. Ivory tossed him another disgusted look.

Despite the situation, Constable Painter had to force his eyes off Dr. Ivory—*that's exactly the colour of her skin*—and onto Vita Bell. Dr. Ivory handed her a tissue.

"There, there," he heard himself saying ridiculously, "we're here to help. Who had to read the uh, missive? Aloud?"

"Pendy," she whispered after a sniffle.

"And when was this?"

Vita blew her nose. "Why aren't you in uniform? You're not a real cop."

"I'm plain clothes today. Now, tell me when Pendy, I mean Amelia, read the message aloud."

"Plainclothes? Like on Law and Order?" Patrick nodded and was secretly pleased to see a fleeting smile tease Tempest's lips. *What gorgeous hair*. "It's missive. Sister Benedict must say missive, missive, missive, a hundred thousand times. D'you know it means a message from God?" Patrick nodded again, happy to discover the meaning, encouraging her on. "Yesterday. Pendy was late. She pushed me away, wouldn't play. I got mad and left. Then she was late. Do you have a horse? No? How 'bout a dog? Benton Fraser has one."

"What was the...missive?" Dr. Ivory spoke for the first time. Patrick let the strong music of her voice roll around in his head.

"Never had it before." She stood up, in proper homage to the task: "Old Sins Cast Long Shadows." The child plopped back down. "Don't get it." She chewed her thumb. "What's cast?"

THREE

*She was snatched from me!
Who would have dared such a deed?*

—THE DUKE OF MANTUA, ACT TWO

Patrick Painter couldn't believe his luck. The red-headed vision that was Dr. Tempest Ivory sat stiffly beside him, suffusing the leftover-lunch smells in the sedan with a soft perfume. She'd almost refused to get in when he opened the door and she saw inside. Cursing softly, Patrick hurriedly scooped up the brown bags and styrofoam cups and gave the seat a rapid brushing. She opened the window completely, then carefully edged inside. Though a large woman, she perched delicately, reminding Patrick of some elegant bird on a nest.

The child psychologist wasn't the talkative type. Patrick learned that within the first five minutes when, in response to a weather remark, an inanity he would regret for some time, Dr. Ivory informed him with a cool politeness that she wished to think. Well, excuse me, Painter thought. No need for air conditioning, that's for sure.

While Patrick knew little about women's scents, even his rather large nose recognized quality. So, as he waited his turn at a four-way stop, he idly ran through the possibilities. He'd heard of—and maybe smelled once or twice on Liz Simmons, or was it Heather Leonard—Chanel N° 5. He sniffed surreptitiously. No, this was finer, less sweet.

Ages later, she leaned over and carefully picked up a piece of paper wedged between her seat and the belt. Patrick checked an instinct to pull it from her hand.

"What's this?" she asked, unfolding it cautiously.

For crying out loud, he thought as heat fanned his cheeks, it's not gonna bite you. "Uh, nothing. Should've thrown it out with the rest of the trash." He grabbed for it. "Here, I'll toss it in the back."

"Why, it's a drawing!" she said, ignoring his hand. "Some sort of house design?"

Burning eyes staring straight ahead so she couldn't see his reddening face, he shrugged.

"You do this?"

He admitted he did.

"Why?"

Nobody had ever asked him before. The guys at the office used to tease him about his hobby, but a fierce stare generally shut them up. They had never bothered to ask why, though.

"I, uh, no real reason." *God, you sound like an idiot!*

Tempest looked at him, amused. He felt the flame light his cheeks again. "Come on, Constable. Everyone's got a reason. Why house plans?"

"Dunno," he croaked. Patrick swallowed and tried again. "Guess I just like drawing."

She nodded. A single, loose bronze curl waved across her forehead. "Often a sign of release. Do you find it beneficial, the drawing?"

Release? Beneficial? Christ, she's analyzing me! He switched lanes too sharply and she lurched toward him. Patrick neatly snatched the drawing from her hand and shoved it in his pocket. He caught a whiff of her scent and felt like a greater fool.

"Look, I'm...they're really...I shouldn't have..."

"No problem," she replied coldly, hitching herself up nearer the passenger door. "We all have our little secrets."

"It's not a...oh, never mind."

They drove the rest of the way in an unsettled silence, Patrick obsessively rerunning the incident in his mind, feeling angrier at himself and coming up with a variety of smoother responses. Finally, to break the endless pattern, he concentrated on her perfume. By the time the sedan rolled into Alice Penderghast's cluttered drive, Patrick decided he would call it Eau de Ivory. He liked the sound of that. Very exotic.

SYDNEY MAYNE ADORED SECRETS. SHE SLID HER SMALL HAND ALONG THE LEATHER book, fingered the raised gold writing and tingled with delight. It hadn't been easy to sneak into the nuns' wing—Sister Dick had nearly walked in on her—but Sydney was slim and quick. She'd hidden behind one of the heavy wooden doors and waited until the clacking of Sister Dick's rosary faded. With the morning's excitement, the students were momentarily forgotten and Sydney had grabbed her chance.

A quick look confirmed the coast was clear, then Sydney blew a raspberry at the statue of the Mother Mary and scampered along the corridor. The smell of wax tickled her nostrils and she avoided the shiny gaze from the graduating class photos that guarded the walls. She paused at the foot of the narrow stairs leading to the bell tower and felt a chill across her neck. She moved swiftly through the serene nuns' wing, her sneakered footsteps silent on the oak floor. Sydney ducked through another doorway and into what the Mother Superior called her inner sanctum. Sydney had seen it all before, a couple of times at least, but there was never time to look, to find. She was always primed to scuttle away at the slightest sound.

Until this morning. She'd thought about setting another fire until she realized, during the hastily arranged assembly on the front lawn, that everyone was outside. Even old Sister Agnes had been dragged from her beloved library. And the sisters were all upset, talking heatedly among themselves, giving no thought to their charges. Mother Superior was lecturing a stocky, big-nosed policeman and nice Dr. Ivory. The school counselor's presence made Sydney hesitate. She'd had her first private session, as her mother called it, with the doctor and had found it hard to hate her. Still, she didn't owe the young woman anything. And this chance was too good to miss.

Sydney smelled the secrets in the book's leather spine. Full of 'em, just as she'd thought. It must be, for Sydney had watched Mother Superior write in it when she thought she was alone. Sydney thought this the best secret of all: that anyone would think they could be alone at the Old Soul. Smiling inwardly, she shoved the diary in her pillowcase and skipped off to lunch.

"WHY WOULD SHE DO IT? WHY, WHY?"

Tempest Ivory watched Alice Penderghast and marvelled at her pain, her loss, and at how freely she expressed these to all and sundry. For a moment, she felt a stirring of memory, like

the wings of a moth. No, no, NO. With an effort, she quashed the insect and continued her quiet, persistent questioning of Amelia's mom and her boyfriend, Terry Brethour.

"Did something happen to her recently?"

"What?" the tousle-haired woman asked, blowing her nose.

"Had her mood changed? Was she having trouble at school? At home?" Tempest glanced up into Terry Brethour's narrow face. Alice Penderghast's latest was a scrawny, short guy, with barely enough moustache fuzz for a peach. He had very red lips, which glistened when he licked them. Tempest didn't like the way he avoided her gaze. Almost immediately upon her arrival, her antennae had been tuned to the man who fidgeted beside Alice. She'd seen too many other "latests": weak, demanding men with no emotional attachment to their lover's children. Poverty, ignorance, insecurity, barely-suppressed anger: not a loving family kind of environment. Watching just a couple of National Geographic specials taught that nature was filled with errant males disposing of offspring other than their own.

"No!" Alice cried. "There was nothin' wrong with 'er! Can't you see? Me and Terry loved her. She's all I..Oh, God, Terry, nooo..." Alice Penderghast broke down again. Brethour fidgeted beside her, dirty fingers drumming a tattoo on the cigarette-stained coffee table. Tempest felt nothing for the woman, nothing for the child, nothing for herself. The townhouse, with its unkempt yard, cluttered living room and beer cases lining the hall, depressed the hell out of her. Why do these women do it? The thought popped into her head and immediately she was ashamed.

"Why the fuck're you doing this?" Terry Brethour asked, putting an arm around his girlfriend.

"Hey," Painter piped in from his spot near the door, "watch your language."

Brethour shrugged. "Can't you see she's upset?"

"What about you, Terry?" Tempest asked, deliberately using his Christian name.

"Whaddya mean, me?" His pink tongue snaked out to touch a fat upper lip. "Got nothin' to do with it."

"I didn't say you had. Did you notice any changes in Amelia?"

"You always shout?"

Patrick flushed slightly but Tempest ignored the remark and waited.

"Changes?" Brethour glanced down at his girlfriend. "Course not. She's Ali's kid, y'know. Didn't have much to do with 'er."

I'll bet you didn't. "No? Didn't take her to school, pick her up, give her a bath?"

Brethour scowled. "A bath!? You fuckin' crazy? I never touch—"

"What're ya doing?" Alice wailed. "Terry's got nothin' to do with it. He loved her, didn't you, Ter?" She leaned against him.

"Course I did," he replied coldly. Tempest knew he loved no one but his scrawny, teensy-balled self. He jerked a cigarette pack from his T-shirt pocket and tugged one free. "Anyway, why these stupid questions?" He lit the cigarette and blew smoke into Tempest's face. "Christ, the kid's killed herself. You gonna blame that on me?"

At this, Alice bellowed and fought against her lover's hold. Brethour snapped. "Why don't you just get the fuck—"

In two quick strides, Painter crossed the room. He grabbed Brethour by the shirt and jerked him to his feet. The cigarette dropped to the floor. “I warned you. Watch your goddamned mouth!” Patrick shoved him back on the couch. Brethour stared up at the policeman, lips quivering like a newly cut worm. As though realizing the ridiculousness of his statement, Patrick stepped back, breathing hard.

Tempest walked over, brushed Painter aside and delicately ground out the cigarette in the overflowing ashtray. After waiting five beats, she spoke calmly. “Okay, Terry, we know this is a bad time, but we need to talk.”

“Talk! Ha! You call that—” a dirty finger jabbed at Painter “—talking?” He stood up. Patrick stiffened. “Get outta my house before I sue the shit outta ya!”

Alice sniffled, blew her nose. Painter and Brethour stared at one another like two old fighters. Finally, Patrick shot Dr. Ivory a look. “Okay,” she said. “I’ll be back.” They both mumbled their condolences again, and left.

“Jeez, Doc. Where’d you get your tact? From a cereal box?”

Tempest stared at him. “Trying to be funny?”

“Uh, no.” Patrick felt blood rushing to his scalp. “You went at that guy like a pit bull and, well, you coulda been a bit more considerate.”

“So you’re the psychologist now! Where’d you get your licence? From a matchbook cover? And what would you call that display back there? Policing in the nineties?” She wrenched open the cruiser’s door. “Don’t lecture me on my job and don’t ever refer to me as Doc.”

She wedged herself in. Patrick held his tongue and gently shut the door. He grinned as he walked around the rear.

“WHY DO KIDS KILL THEMSELVES?”

“Pardon?” Tempest blinked and pulled herself back from another hanging long ago.

“Kids. Why do they commit suicide?” Patrick was cruising down the Patricia Bay Highway, wishing he’d taken the slower route through Central Saanich, the most rural of the peninsula communities taking their name from the Salish Indian word for fertile soil.

“Oh, hundreds of reasons. Psychological problems, depression, trouble at school, somebody abusing them.” Tempest began to relax. This was safe, her work territory. “That’s why I was pushing back there. Something or someone—and I’d bet my right arm it’s that bastard, Brethour—hurt Amelia so badly, something in front of her was unsolvable. Death seemed preferable.”

“Why d’you think it’s him? Bit of a puke, maybe, but I saw no reason to suspect him.”

“There you go again—” she snapped. She hesitated, breathed deeply several times. Patrick watched control envelop her like a shawl. When Tempest spoke again, her voice was restrained and soft; the tone that stroked his heart. “Give me a little credit, will you? I’ve seen his kind too often before. He needs the woman, but the kid’s a major inconvenience.”

Painter changed lanes to get around an old Volvo. Just as he suspected: an old guy, grey hair partially covered by a cap, was at the wheel, cautiously rolling along as if en route to the dentist. “Does an eleven-year-old understand death?”

Tempest flicked a glance at Patrick. Was he really interested? His nose was rather big, but she liked his solid, open face. “That’s a real hornet’s nest, that one. Many schools of thought. Some believe that children perceive death as temporary, pleasant. Others have come up with three stages of understanding death.” Tempest paused, waiting for a sign to continue.

Patrick was drumming his fingers on the steering wheel. “So, what are they?”

While collecting her thoughts, Tempest adjusted her seatbelt and tugged her skirt over her knees. “In stage one, the child is aware of death, but observes it as a lack of movement. In stage two the child understands all features of death, but only in physical terms; and lastly, the child comprehends everything in the abstract.”

“Gimme the Coles notes version, Doc—er, I mean, Doctor. Would Amelia really know that dying is permanent?”

Tempest nodded. “An eleven-year-old would. Most of the literature agrees with Gessel and Ilg. Children from eleven to thirteen have a pretty good idea of what it means. Course, you have to understand that suicidal children view the world and death a little differently.”

“How so?” Patrick asked, inwardly delighted with Tempest’s sudden animation.

“Well, a child who’s depressed enough, driven to hopelessness, sees death as more agreeable and less final than others.”

“But you just said—”

“I know. Kane’s stages are for average children. Suicidal kids aren’t average, nothing about them is typical or normal.” She paused, for a moment years away, then blinked. “They are, in their own eyes, under intolerable pressure. Often they’re an impulsive or aggressive personality, usually inflexible, can’t see things from different perspectives. They have an essential need which can only be met, from their limited viewpoint, through death. They’re faced with two options: accept death and all its finality, or continue to live in unspeakable pain. So they do something quite unique, yet very human: they create a third option. It’s called a defensive distortion, allowing them to see death as easy, acceptable, and not final.”

Constable Painter rolled to a stop at the gates of the Perpetual Soul. “You really think they believe it? That death’s not final?”

“Oh, yes,” replied Tempest. “I know they do.”

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