

## Chapter One

He stared at his bare feet on the hot, rough surface of the sidewalk. The skin on the top of each foot was stained a dark brown from the summer sun and the dirt of the streets. It was almost as brown as shoe leather would have been if he had been wearing any shoes. Still looking down, he could not miss the half-moons of black dirt encrusted underneath each chipped and brittle toenail and wondered how he could have let himself sink to such a low level. Feeling a pang of guilt, he was glad his mother could not see him. She would not recognize him, and if she had, she would have become hysterical over the sight of him in his current condition.

A slow, single drop of sweat rolled off his forehead and fell to become a wet blotch on the dry surface of the sidewalk. For what seemed longer than rationally possible, the liquid blob sat and sizzled on the blistering concrete as the heat boiled up in waves to hit his already overheated face. On this hot, dry August afternoon, walking along the sidewalks of downtown Nashville felt like walking through a hot oven.

I need to get medical help. If I can just get to the mission, but am I going the right way was all his confused mind could manage to spit out. He knew he needed to stop and ask for help with finding the downtown homeless shelter, but the last time he had stopped to ask for directions, it had almost cost him his life. That had been in the port of a foreign city.

He was still cognitive enough to realize the disease attacking his body contributed to his mental state,

but since that dangerous encounter, his fear and paranoia had increased with each passing day. Now heart racing panic set in if a stranger on the sidewalk turned to glance at him for one split second longer than what he felt they should. He had covered his trail as well as he could but knew he was no professional in evading detection from the type of people that were looking for him and what he was carrying. His pursuers could not be too far behind.

Trying not to be overcome by the weakness and tremors caused by his fever, he leaned one hand against the hot brick of an old building. Taking two slow steps forward and bracing himself against its wall, he managed to move into the shadow afforded by the railroad overpass right above his head. He looked both ways down the four lanes of Eighth Avenue and recognized the tall red brick buildings of Cannery Row.

His mind slipped back to the last time he had been there. It had been for a concert inside its large Ballroom. Although it seemed like a lifetime ago, it had only been this past April. Since then, the upheaval and obliteration of his old life had been so total and complete that he knew he would never be able to reclaim the naïve innocent world he had once lived in and realized he had only himself to blame. He had been the one to set the wheels in motion that had resulted in his situation being what it was at this moment.

I'm going the wrong way. He wiped one dirty hand across his burning forehead. He shook his head, and shoulder-length, curly black hair swung around his face. A few strands stuck to one wet cheek. As another intense tremor took hold of his body, he lost control of himself

and for a few minutes could only lean against the bricks until it had run its course. The chills and fever had been going on now for the last two days. The only warm places left on his body were the burning soles of his feet and the pulsating fire in his temples.

I must get help. Can't let them find me and the papers before I get them to where they belong. I can't give up. Everything depends on me getting the papers into the right hands. Just need to get to the mission. I can rest there. He patted the front of his chest. A small piece of paper rustled inside his shirt pocket.

He turned around to walk back the way he had come. Again, a chill shook his body, and the fever he had been waging war against finally won and sent him down head first into the hard gray of the concrete sidewalk. Lying face down, the last thing he saw were the tires of a car going down Eighth before the dark unconsciousness of the fever overwhelmed him. Like vultures circling a newly dead body, a few homeless men standing outside the nearby free medical clinic moved forward to pick at his still warm body to claim any prizes they thought might be left behind.

As the small group huddled over the still form of the young man on the hot concrete, pockets were searched, and the backpack he had been carrying was fought over until it was claimed by the winner of a small scuffle waged on the sidewalk. Without warning, a shrill voice interrupted their foraging.

"Get away from him. I'm calling the police!"

A brave, blue-jean clad young woman elbowed her way through the small group to bend over the

motionless form of the young man lying in the hot afternoon sun. All of the men scattered unwilling to face an afternoon encounter with the Metro Police Department. Fumbling in her purse, she pulled out a cellphone and dialed 911.

“I’m on Eighth Avenue South. There’s a man down on the sidewalk. I’m not sure if he’s even still breathing. Please hurry. I don’t know how much longer he can hold on.”

Some of the men had backed away when the young girl first arrived but now moved a few inches closer to watch and make sure there would be no more treasures to retrieve off the body. The woman leaned over the young man until the sound of a siren assured her that help was on its way. Only one older man hesitated for a few minutes then slipped off by himself through the alley.

Red lights flashing, a Metro ambulance pulled up to her position on the sidewalk. A well-built young paramedic jumped out to take her place. She stood up and moved out of the way.

“What happened here?”

“I don’t know. I found him like this.”

“Have you touched him?”

“Only his shoulder.”

“Good. He looks contagious. Pete, bring the IV with you. He needs fluids. He’s burning up.”

A second paramedic brought the IV. The first turned their patient onto his back. A small trickle of blood started to ooze from his nose. He moaned and gave one small cough. After a second cough, the young man lifted his head, started gagging and then projectile

vomited red bloody fluid over the paramedic's chest and arms. Both ambulance workers backed away, but as a massive seizure took control of their young patient's body, they placed him on a waiting gurney and heaved him through the back doors of the ambulance. The last thing the young man's sidewalk savior saw of him was his still twitching feet before the door of the ambulance was slammed in her face. She stood watching the flashing red lights fade into the distance through the Saturday afternoon traffic.

## Chapter Two

“Father Tom, I’m through typing the manuscript. I’m going to go on home.” The shrill voice of the woman carried with an echo over the young priest’s cellphone.

“All right, Margaret. I appreciate you staying over tonight to help me get these last pages ready for the publisher. I’ll have the extra check in your box tomorrow morning. Since it’s so late, can I walk you out to your car?”

“No thanks, Father. My husband’s waiting outside. He’ll follow me to my car.”

“Great. Thanks again for helping this procrastinator out.”

“Oh, I almost forgot. Your tea is ready in the kitchen. I thought you might want some before you left for the night.”

“Thanks for remembering. I don’t know what Father Robert and I would have done without you. I’ll help myself on my way out.”

“Good night. See you tomorrow in mass.”

“Good night. You and your husband be careful on the way home.”

The young priest tapped on the glowing screen of his cellphone and watched it turn black. He rubbed his aching forehead. I shouldn’t put this type of thing off until the last minute. I’ve got to get some sleep.

He stood up and walked over to a small mirror hanging beside the door. Glancing at himself, he realized the dark shadows of fatigue under his eyes would be very obvious to his audience during his Sunday morning mass and resisted the small pricks of the urge to stay and work for another hour. Perfectionism had always been one of his faults that had often impeded his ability to finish things, and the manuscript was complete just the way it was. So, passing his hand through his thick brown hair and jingling car keys in his pocket, he forced himself to step out of the room and close the squeaky, old oak door behind him.

He walked through the main body of the church and could not help but admire the statuary and artwork above the altar. I was blessed to have Saint Angela's as my first assignment. I could not have started out at a better place.

He continued crossing the front of the large room and slowed down only to linger in front of the wooden figure of Christ on the cross in the small alcove to the side of the main sanctuary. This particular rendition seemed to him to be a cross between Picasso's cubism and art deco styles with the large chevron shapes in the background behind the cross. The sharp angles in the wood made the Christ look abnormal, but he supposed after almost being beaten to death, his Savior's abused body might have looked rather deformed. Still, he admired the contemporary style of the young artist.

St. Angela's was built in the early 1920's, but in September of 2006, a voracious fire had destroyed the front of the building. The regional diocese had approved

a rebuild of the front structures in a more contemporary style of architecture. It was to match the growing influx of young families and millennials into the Belmont Avenue area and the remodeling of older homes with a more modern take on the neighborhood's recreation.

As was the young priest's custom, the result for him of standing before the crucified form of Christ on the cross was a deep sense of peace. Others in seminary had not had the same experience of the representation of Christ's last hours on earth, but it had always sent shivers of awe and wonder down his spine. At times while praying before the figure, the presence of Christ in the room with him had been so real, it felt as if at any moment a hand would be placed upon his shoulder in comfort if he just concentrated and focused hard enough.

He stopped his late-night rambling and fell to both knees in front of the life-size wooden figure. After giving the sign of the cross, he bowed his head and began his prayer. However, this night's late hour worship did not have its usual effect. The peaceful sense of being filled up or made complete did not come.

The further he got into his praise the stronger a sense of dread and anxiety started to fall around his shoulders. This was not normal for him. Taking a deep breath, he stopped and tried to start over. His sense of anxiety only intensified. A few beads of sweat popped out on his forehead. Was there another presence in the room besides just him and his Savior?

With his concentration now broken, he turned to look behind him. I really do need some sleep he thought. Again, he tried to start another prayer. This time his



reverie was interrupted by what he thought was the sound of footsteps at the back of the sanctuary crossing from one side of the large room to the other. Was it his imagination or did he catch out of the corner of his eye the dark shadowy form of a man darting between the columns close to the Belmont Avenue entrance of the cathedral? That was not good. No one should be in here at this hour. The place was supposed to be locked up tighter than a drum. He rose from his kneeling position and turned to try and catch the culprit.

“Hello, hello. Who’s there? Is anyone there?”

Only a dead, empty silence answered the wavering echoes of his inquiry as his words bounced from one wall to another. Attempting to make as little noise as possible, he moved toward the front entrance and passed between each tall column seeing and hearing nothing and no one. Again, he thought I really do need sleep. I had better get out of here.

He rubbed at the fatigue in his eyes and shook his head to dispel the dark atmosphere that had enveloped him from the first second he had entered the open expanse of the sanctuary. Moving once again, the sound of each step he took on the cold marble floor trailed behind his progress across the large inner space. He could not help but keep looking back over his shoulder until he reached the safe confines of the smaller kitchen. He stopped and took a deep breath.

There exactly as Margaret had said it would be was his tea in an old insulated thermos sitting on the counter beside the stove. He reached up into the cupboard, pulled out his chipped coffee mug with the

large black letters TOM and with hands shaking, poured a large dose of the steaming liquid. He gulped down the full cup and poured more into the empty hollow of the porcelain vessel then sank back into one of the wooden ladderback chairs to finish off a second cup. Now too tired to even try to keep his eyes open, he felt his body relax, almost going numb, and let his chin fall to his chest.

# # #

With a sudden jolt, Father Tom's head snapped upward. The only sounds present were the scritch, scritch of the soft slippers on his feet grating on the heavy grey tiles of the cathedral's roof. He rubbed the back of his hand across his eyes, blinking to try and clear his blurred vision. Where am I? Oh yes, he remembered now.

He shook his head and swayed trying to keep his balance on the sharp angles of the church's dark roof. Yes, the voices had told him to go out tonight, to get up on the roof and show the world what a wonderful, saving God we all have. He is a god so full of wonder and ecstasy that He could make even a lowly young novice like himself be able to fly. He could fly high above the cares and everyday problems of this world to soar out into the unknown with nothing but Christ to hold him up.

Yes, Father, you can do this. Flying with Christ should be no problem for someone such as yourself. Remember, He loves and cares for you and will catch you if you fall. Take flight now Father and trust in God. From

somewhere deep inside a very dark place, the insidious, sly voices spoke to him again. Fly, Father, fly!

The young priest spread out his arms and looked to the full moon hanging large and heavy in the dark summer sky over Nashville. The day had been unusually hot with no air moving at all. Dust and humidity had created a thick, yellow circle around the moon's white, crusty edge.

Teetering on the crest of the roof, he stood trying to keep his balance as he breathed in the warm humid air covering everything like a sticky, moist blanket that could not be shaken off. Again, the soft sound of the slippers on his feet was the only noise to catch his attention. He looked down at his feet. Father Robert would have wanted him to go flying in his old house shoes. That would be a fitting tribute to the man himself. They were only worn, flat sandals, but the soft cotton kept the tiles from hurting his feet. His eyes traveled up his body and took in the white robe he had taken from his closet below. It would be only proper to go flying in the full vestments of his priestly office.

I just need to get to the front edge of the roof. That would be the best spot. He had managed to make his way to the front of the cathedral's roof. The only thing separating him from success was the large concrete statue of the archangel Michael overlooking Belmont Avenue below. Keeping a delicate balance on the sharp angle of the roof, he leaned against the angel's back and threw one arm around it as he manipulated his way around its edge. He inched his way around it cautiously, fingers clinging to whatever he could manage to find to grasp on its hard,

curved surfaces. Sweating and with legs trembling from his efforts, the young priest stopped and leaned backward against the front of the angel's chest. From here, he could still see the huge yellow moon suspended in the thick summer night's air.

There is almost no traffic. It must be very late. Balancing himself with one hand on the angel's large sword, he leaned closer to the front edge of the sanctuary's roof to stare at the empty street below. Now would be his one perfect moment.

Yes, Father, yes. Now you can show your faith to the world. Fly, Father, fly the soft, dark voices inside his head whispered. Black snakes of deceit or trust – he could no longer tell the difference – they coiled and slithered through his mind entangled so tightly he knew he would never loosen their grip which was threatening his existence.

I must show my faith. Now is my one great opportunity. Father Tom let go of the safety of the angel and spread his arms outward lifting them upward toward the arch of the celestial spheres above still glowing with the city's lights. Nashville would be no lackluster place tonight!

“Tonight, you will shine with more than man-made light. Tonight, you will shine with the glory of God.”

After speaking those few last words, he made one forward lunge and took his last step into the thin air lying just beyond the roof's edge. With arms and legs flailing at the empty air for support, the last sounds Father Tom heard were the loud screech of a car's brakes and a young

woman's scream as she witnessed his white robes  
fluttering down and smacking against the hard, black  
asphalt of the street below.

## **Chapter Three**

“This has been one weird day, huh Sarge,” a young police officer stated as he moved to stand beside a police cruiser whose blue lights were burning through the night air to illuminate the street.

Five other cars came to a screeching halt in front of the large church joining the first to interrupt the night’s peace. Within minutes, the street and sidewalks were filled with blue uniforms and equipment. The flash of lights from cameras with the cars’ blue lights pulsating in all directions created a disturbing and unsettling surrealism around the night’s tableau.

“You can say that again, Joseph. What with finding that guy on Eighth Avenue dying from that strange disease and now this? I’ll admit I’ve never seen anything quite like this one here.”

The older policeman swept one hand out in an expansive gesture to encircle the scene playing out in front of the church’s main door and spilling out onto the gray asphalt stage now full of players trying to make sense of the night’s event.

“What happened with that guy found on Eighth today?”

“After the medical examiner took one look at him, he ordered everyone in contact with the body to be put in quarantine. He didn’t want what had killed the poor kid to

spread any further. Word at the station is that the two paramedics are going to be quarantined for maybe at least two weeks. The M.E. said the kid had been carrying some sort of plague or something like that. Sounds almost biblical to me, and then we have this tonight.” The older officer lowered his hand to rub his chin.

“You don’t think they could. . .”

“No, no. I don’t see how that could be. At least, I hope not. It’s probably just a strange set of coincidences in one day is all.”

A gray sedan pulled up to the edge of the sidewalk and lurched to a sudden stop missing the bright yellow band of crime scene tape by only a few inches. A sudden, unexpected hot breeze sent the garish tape rocking and swaying in the night air. Dust and debris swirled and moved down the long corridor that was Belmont Avenue. This was one of the main thoroughfares that connected some of the older urban neighborhoods close to Music Row and Vanderbilt University to the affluent area of the city known as Green Hills.

“Looks like homicide is here,” the younger policeman stated to his older companion.

A stout, middle-aged man emerged from the sedan and moved to stand beside the two blue uniformed men watching the busy scene.

“Sergeant.” The man nodded after his terse greeting. “I hear we’ve got a dead priest.”

“Yes sir,” the officer answered and turned to look into the crystal-clear blue eyes of the new arrival. He knew the calm, gentle gaze belied the pugnacious nature of their owner.

Detective Hayden Douglass was Nashville's best. Known to be a bulldog when it came to investigating a crime, he was tenacious and stubborn until he was satisfied there was not one single piece of evidence left to dig up and after that was sometimes known to still keep on going.

The sergeant continued with, "the young priest there," as he turned and pointed to Father Tom's body spread out in an unnatural, grotesque position on the asphalt. A chalk outline formed a white, crisp halo around the body in stark contrast to the dark gray pavement.

The detective lifted the crime scene tape and slipped under it. He walked over to the side of the body and stared down at the dead man's prostrate, lifeless form. The young priest's robes were spread out around his body in the shape of soft white wings, wings which had been useless in the empty void beyond the edge of the cathedral's roof. The only color staining the white cloth was from the red pool of blood which had oozed from the young man's head. His right arm extended above his head with the wrist mangled so badly his hand turned 180 degrees around from its normal position. The left foot also was rotated out of place to stick straight up into the air, toes pointing toward the back of his calf. Observing the damage, the detective remained motionless for a few minutes then shook his head in intense, quick movements.

"What in the world happened here tonight for you to end face down in the street like this?" he whispered to himself. He walked back to the other two officers. "Has the crime lab started yet?"

"Yes," the older officer stated.



“Give me the highlights so I can start trying to understand what happened.” Douglan pulled out a small notepad. With blue pen hovering motionless above the white lined page, the detective stared into the other man’s tense face.

“A call came in to 911 about ten past midnight from a young woman named,” the sergeant thumbed through his own notes, “Maria Bruno. She and her boyfriend were on their way home from a friend’s party in the Gulch area when Father Tom’s body fell flat out in front of their car. Said it missed the hood of their car by only a few inches. It scared both of them to death for sure. She’s standing over there if you want to talk to her.”

He pointed to a thin, young girl with large blue eyes. The intense glare of the lights gave an incandescent glow to the straight blond hair falling just below her shoulders. A husky, dark-headed young man placed one arm around her shoulders as she stood trembling from what she had witnessed this hot August night.

“I’ll get to her in a minute. What’s been found so far? Are there any signs of a break-in, anything suggesting the possibility of suicide?” The detective fired off the questions in staccato fashion.

“No to both questions. So far, I’ve been told nothing unusual has been found, but Mark and Joe from the lab are still inside looking for evidence if you want to talk to them.”

Douglan frowned and flipped the notepad closed. After a brusque thanks, he turned toward the young girl leaning against her male companion.

“Miss Bruno, I’m Detective Douglan with the Metro Homicide Unit. I understand you and your boyfriend here were witnesses to Father Tom McClarin’s fall?”

Douglan extended his hand forward. After a second’s hesitation, the young girl reached out and let him enclose her small hand within his large grip. He could feel the tremors caused by what she had seen still shaking her body.

“Yes,” she began in a soft tone.

Douglan had to lean forward to hear.

“Brent and I were coming home from a friend’s party. We were driving down Belmont when all of a sudden this large white thing just sort of fell out of the sky from nowhere right in front of our car. We drove up on the sidewalk in front of that house over there to keep from running over it.”

Douglan could see the couple’s small, red, two-seater convertible parked halfway up on the sidewalk in front of a large house across the street. As he glanced toward it, another light was switched on in a room downstairs. Silhouetted against the bright light, a man stared back at him from the window.

“We didn’t know it was a man until Brent went over to look at it, I mean the body. That’s when I called 911. For help, I mean. I’ve never been around anything like this before.”

Her blue eyes started to fill up, and one tear slipped down onto her cheek. The boy leaned in to wipe at it with a suntanned finger.

“Did you see anyone else, anyone on the sidewalk, crossing the street, anywhere around the church?”

“There was no one, only this large white thing falling out of the sky.” She teared up again.

“Son, can you add anything else to Miss Bruno’s statement?”

“No sir. I can’t. She’s told you everything. We were driving real slow down the Avenue here. You know, we had the top down. The night was so hot, and we were listening to the radio. All of a sudden out of nowhere this large, big white thing,” the boy spread his arms out wide and brought them down, “fell out of the sky. I almost hit the lamp post over there trying to miss it. I’m glad I didn’t hurt my dad’s car. It’s the first time he’s let me use it. It’s brand new.” The boy ended with a proud smile.

Douglan responded with a weak grin. “Yeah, I’m glad you didn’t either. We didn’t need anything else to worry about tonight, did we?” He hoped the sarcasm was not completely wasted on the young man. If a bent fender could have been the only destruction he had to deal with tonight.

“Here’s my card. Since you’ve already given your statements to the other officer over there, for now you two can go on home. I may need you to come downtown to the station if there are any problems later. Do you have another ride coming?”

The young girl started, “My Mom and Dad are on their way.”

“Keep my card and call me if you think of anything else.” He shook the young man’s hand and turned to walk toward the front entrance of the cathedral.

A thin, gawky looking young man wearing the dark blue vest of the crime lab stepped out onto the concrete

steps and stood for a moment surveying the busy scene before him. He passed the large black valise he was carrying from his right hand into his left then set it down beside him. He took out a white handkerchief from his vest pocket and lifted black frame glasses to wipe beads of sweat off of his forehead and nose.

“Hey, detective, you headed inside? Mark sent me out here to finish taking photos.”

“Yeah. Where can I find him?”

“He’s in the kitchen in the back hallway. You know where that’s at? On the west side over there.” The lab tech jerked a thumb up in the direction of the kitchen. “He’s still there gathering evidence.”

He shook his head as he watched the number of police and onlookers which had gathered at the edges of the crime tape. “This’ll make the front page tomorrow. It’s like a three-ring circus out here. What a mess. I’d better hurry before we lose something we need.”

He scooped up the valise and moved over to the dead man’s side and removed a camera. He started firing off frames as fast as he could slam his finger down on the mechanism’s shutter.

Douglan was glad to get away from the noise and confusion outside to the shelter of the main sanctuary inside. The only people here were two lab techs trying to gather fingerprints at the end of the long aisle in front of the altar.

He passed them with a quick inquiry of ‘main kitchen’ as he pointed westward. One, a young woman, looked up to nod an affirmation.

Remembering his last visit to this church, he was pretty sure he knew where he was going. On that occasion, he had been the best man at his widowed brother Bob's second marriage ceremony. The wedding had been a massive affair since Douglan and his wife both came from large Catholic families.

His wife would be upset at the news of the young priest's death. Cici, a nickname she had all of her life, was what he and all of her family called her instead of Elizabeth Anne. She had always been a devoted Catholic, but it seemed to Douglan to mean so much more to his wife than just a deep devotion to a church or a religion. She lived on a different level than the average person as if she was in touch with the reality of a spiritual world and a living, breathing God.

His beliefs were not as rock solid as his wife's. Sitting in services with her, he often had a hard time listening to the message from the pulpit. Maybe he had just gotten cynical over the years, but at times, he was full of too much doubt about whether or not the speaker knew what he was talking about.

Things he had seen on his job caused him to question how a kind, loving God could allow the horrific types of brutality and darkness he saw every day to happen to the innocents of the world, especially the children. Why did a good God allow such things to occur? He would never understand that as long as he was on this side of the grave.

He managed to find the small kitchen. "Mark, what have you got for me?"

“Everything here is just as we found it,” a short paunchy man with graying red hair answered as he slid out from underneath a small wooden table. He leaned with both hands on the table as he lifted himself off the tile floor. “I’m getting too old for this job. I can’t climb in and out of places like I used to.”

“You’re just as spry as you used to be.” With a grin on his face, Douglan slapped the man on the back.

“Yeah, right. Anyway, I want you to look at this. What we found here were three upright chairs and this fourth one turned over like this and then there’s the coffee cup.” Mark touched an old cracked coffee mug on the table top with a gloved finger. “See, it’s still turned over with the tea on the table.”

“Can I move it?”

“Put on one of these gloves. We’ve already got all the photos in here that we need.”

Douglan rolled the cup over. In bold black letters was the word TOM. “You will, of course, do the chemical analysis on the tea?”

“How long have we been working together?” Mark rolled his eyes. “Anyway, it looks like the tea came out of this old thermos over here.” The lab tech pointed to the open thermos sitting on top of the stove.

“I’m going to need to know where that came from and who put it there.”

“We’ve already got samples of the tea, and we’ll bag everything we need. We can get started when we get back tonight.” The thermos was placed in the bottom of a clear plastic bag. Mark snapped his valise shut. “It looks like it’s time for me to leave. The rest of my crew will stay

until all the fingerprinting is done. Are you going to come back to the lab?"

"I might stop by after I get all my paperwork started. I need to see if there were any other people in the building."

Douglan turned to go back the way he had come. He had made it halfway down the center aisle of the sanctuary when the young officer who had been out front came in followed by a tall, silver-haired man wearing the black clothing and white collar of a priest.

"Detective Douglan." The young officer flagged him down in mid-stride. "This is Father Robert Sullivan. He's the ex-priest, I mean the former head priest of the cathedral."

"Father, I'm glad you came in. Maybe you can help shed some light on what happened tonight."

"I have no idea, detective. All I know is my former secretary, Margaret, called me and gave me the awful news that Tom, I mean Father Tom, was dead. One of our parishioners was out late, passed by the church, saw all the police cars and called her. Is it true Father Tom has jumped off the top of the building? This is terrible, just terrible."

The older man covered his face with both hands.

"We are not sure yet what has taken place inside this building tonight. I was hoping you could fill me in on that. How about we sit down." Douglan reached out to help the almost overcome man down onto a church pew.

"As your young officer said, I'm the former rector or senior priest here at St. Angela's. I retired just ten months ago. I helped Tom ease into his new position then stepped down for good. I've never seen a man so well

suited for the priesthood and his position here, especially in such a young man. I couldn't have been happier with, with. . ." his voice faltered and fell off into silence as he sniffed and large tears filled his eyes. He pulled a white handkerchief from a dark trouser pocket. "I can't believe he would do something like this. He seemed so happy."

"I know this is difficult for you, but I need you to think hard and see if you can give me any clues. Could anyone that you know have wanted to hurt Father Tom? What was his general state of mind? Had you noticed anything out of the ordinary in his behavior? Was he doing drugs?"

The older man shook his head and waved both hands. "No, no, definitely not doing drugs. That's impossible. Someone here would have picked up on that. Besides, he wasn't that kind of person."

"I have to explore all possibilities. Sometimes we don't know people as well as we think we do."

"I told you he seemed happy and was settling well into the life of our parish. He was fitting in, and everyone was beginning to warm up to him. They loved the idea of a young priest with all his enthusiasm and energy. Why, he had just started work on some kind of new research paper he was trying to write. I think he wanted to attempt to turn it into a book. That's what Margaret and he were doing tonight. She was helping transcribe some of the pages for him."

"That would be Margaret who?"

"Margaret Sullivan."

Douglas looked up.



“She is my sister-in-law. She and my brother have been married 36 years this next Monday. My brother followed me here when he learned I was going to be parish priest here.”

“I need her home address and phone number. I will have to talk to her.”

“Sure, it’s 432-8890, and she lives right out on Highway 100, 325 Highway 100. If you can get her to calm down. She was so upset when I talked to her. Please be easy on her. She has a mild heart condition, and Ralph, my brother, may have given her a sedative to keep her calmed down.”

“I understand, but I will need to speak to her as soon as possible. She may have been the last person to see Father Tom alive.”

Father Sullivan stumbled as he tried to lift himself from the pew. Douglan caught him under the arm.

“Do you need any help, Father. We can have a paramedic look at you if you’re not feeling well.”

Pushing the detective’s hand away, the older man said, “No, I can make it through this. Anything I can do to help you just let me know. I can get all of Father Tom’s personnel records out of the office and give you complete access to his desk and personal belongings if that will help in any way.”

“You must be a mind reader.” Douglan patted the priest on his shoulder. “I was going to ask for access to his things. I’ll need to go through them to get me started in the right direction, and the less time I waste the quicker I can decide what steps to take next.”

“Then follow me.” The elderly priest turned back toward the altar and led Douglan past it, through another exit and down a short hallway to a heavy, oak door. It squeaked as Father Sullivan pushed against the dark wood.

The older man walked across the darkened room to turn on a small desk lamp. Light bounced off the shining surface of a massive wooden desk at the back of the room revealing the wood grain and warm sienna tones of the ancient tree that had been used to build it. The atmosphere in the room seemed warm and inviting to Douglan as he continued to look around the room. Floor to ceiling bookcases were so full of books they seemed to be pushing their way off of the shelves. Heavy dark green draperies framed the large window behind the young man’s desk, and white blinds were closed tight against the dark of the night. Douglan walked over to stand behind Father Tom’s empty chair.

“Here’s the key, detective.”

“Thanks.”

Douglan took the old metal key ring from Father Sullivan’s shaking fingers and pushed the key into the lock of the drawer in the middle of the desk. The drawer on well used rollers opened almost without any effort but was empty. Instantaneously, the mood of the room darkened. Something was not right. There was not a pencil, a paperclip, not even a stray staple to be found. Only a small amount of dust remained as Douglan ran his finger on the bare surface.

“Was he some kind of neat freak?”

“No, he was not. Someone has been in here. This drawer should not be empty. Someone’s cleaned everything

out of it.” Father Sullivan leaned across the front of the desk to jerk the drawer out. “This is impossible. I know I have seen him put his papers in here.”

He rounded the corner of the desk to pull two lower drawers open. Their contents were in complete disarray. Whoever had gone through them last must have been in a frantic hurry to leave them in such a mess.

“Father, I need you to look around. Here’s these gloves. See if you think there could be something else missing.”

The priest put the thin gloves on and once again searched the desk’s drawers. “Unless Father Tom had started keeping his research paper somewhere new I’m not aware of, his notes and any transcribed pages Margaret had done for him should have been in that drawer. You will have to confirm this with Margaret, but I’m pretty sure someone has taken everything connected with the paper he was writing.”

Douglas touched his cellphone screen. “Mark, are you still on premises? Good. You’re going to have to search in a periphery of at least a half mile. We have possibly had a theft in the priest’s office. You’ll be looking for any kind of papers or office supplies. His research papers are missing. Search for anything that looks like it could have come from his desk.”

Father Sullivan stood and looked around the room. He walked over to a wooden armoire and opened the doors full of ornate carvings of fruit and cherub heads on each corner staring out into the room’s interior.

“His robes are missing, and my old sandals are gone too. I left them here. I sometimes wear them when I visit,

but of course, Father Tom had them on tonight when you found him, I mean his..." The older man's voice broke.

"I understand. Is there anything else you can remember that's gone?"

"That looks like the most important things. As I said before, since I am not here on a daily basis anymore, I am not up on what all he kept in here. Margaret will be able to fill you in on that."

"The only other thing we need are the personnel records on Father McClarin. We'll need to contact his family. I will have an officer go with you to get those if you wish and then give you a ride back home if you don't feel like driving. If you think of anything else, just give me a call. Here's my cell number. Thanks for all your help." Douglan turned to help the older man out the doorway and back into the hallway. "I forgot to ask. What was his research paper about?"

"I'm not sure of the exact nature of the text, but I believe it was on some of the older manuscripts that had been brought to light in the past few years. I think they were supposed to be about some sort of additional prophecy or revelations about the church in the end times. That's all I know. I have to admit I was not keeping up with all the newer articles and information coming out of the Middle East in regard to that sort of thing. Margaret will be more aware of that information. Let me know if there's anything else I can do, anything at all."

The older man started down the hallway. As Douglan stood watching him, the same young officer appeared in front of the priest and made his way toward the detective.

“Sir, I believe you need to come with me. They’ve found some homeless guy outside in the back alley who thinks he might have seen something. He’s out front in the main sanctuary.” The young man was breathing hard and fast from his short sprint down the hallway.

The two men traveled toward the sanctuary and came upon a small group of blue uniforms huddled around the end of the first pew. As they saw Douglan approaching, they stepped away from what had been holding their attention to reveal a diminutive and extremely dirty older man sitting in a slumped position. He looked up to stare Douglan in the eyes. Douglan coughed as he came closer to his witness. The smell was overwhelming. The man reeked of garbage and alcohol. Was he going to be able to believe anything this witness might say? A look of fear moved across the old man’s face and intensified with each approaching step the detective took.

After Douglan reached the pew, an officer standing close to the old man put a hand on his shoulder. “It’s alright, Willie. This is Detective Douglan from downtown. He just wants to know what you’ve seen. The same thing you told us. Don’t worry. You’re not in trouble.”

Willie looked up with eyes bleary and blood-shot from alcohol and extended a shaking right hand toward the detective. Douglan grasped the offered hand in his own firm grip.

“Hey, Willie, I’m Detective Douglan with Homicide. I need to get a little information from you. That’s all.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Is that your real name, Willie, just Willie?”

“No sir. My mama named me William, William Alexander Snow. I come from Kentucky. Been in Nashville twenty years.”

“Good. The officers here tell me you saw something outside. I need to know what that was. We’ve had the death of a nice, young priest here tonight, and anything you could do to help would be appreciated.”

“Well, like I told them, I didn’t see much. I was sleeping like I do sometimes in the ally out back behind some garbage cans when this man comes rushing out the back door and knocked up against one of them cans. Woke me up so sudden it almost gave me a heart attack. He was in an awful hurry.”

“Could you identify him if we showed you some pictures down at the station?”

“No sir, I could not. It’s not that I don’t want to. It ain’t that. It’s just that the guy had on a helmet, one of them fancy black motorcycle helmets you see all over town. I couldn’t see a thing but that helmet.”

“Anything you could tell me about how big he was or what he was wearing?”

Willie scratched his rough, unshaven chin and glanced sideways up at Douglan. “You wouldn’t have a cigarette for an old man, would you? I’m starting to feel kind of shaky here.”

“You tell us all you saw, and George over there will see if he can find you a whole pack of cigarettes.”

The old man’s eyes lit up. “Yeah, yeah, that’ll work.” He swallowed hard. “Like I said he had on a black helmet, a really extra fancy pair of black, pointy-toed boots and one of them tight black leather jackets, and he left real

fast. I mean real fast on a black motorcycle parked back in the alley. Left real fast.” With one hand shaking, he rubbed his face and started with, “Now if I could have that cigarette?”

“Is that all?”

“Wait a minute. Shoot I almost forgot. There was another man waiting for him on another bike. He was dressed all in black too with a helmet on like the other guy’s. He looked to be a little bigger than the other one. He must have been getting nervous. He kept waving for the other one to come on and get back on his cycle. They took off fast enough to burn the rubber on them bike tires.”

“Thanks for all the help. Now we’re going to go out back, and I want you to show us where the cycles were parked, and after that, you can have your pack of cigarettes.”

Douglan laid a hand on the old man’s shoulder. Two officers lifted the sitting man to his feet. Douglan reached for his phone and started with, “Hi, honey. I’m not going to be able to make it home for a long time. Just wanted to let you know.”

It was going to be a long night indeed, much longer than he had at first anticipated. He flicked off his phone and continued to step toward what appeared to be a difficult night. It was his responsibility to try and make sense out of what had happened to the young priest whose cold, lifeless body still lay only a few yards outside the front doors of one of the largest churches in town.