

Chapter 1

Someone's tapping on the window and light's streaming into the van. It's one of Belton's finest. I scramble to cover my still opened pants with the bottom part of my suit jacket and power down the window.

"Reverend? Are you alright?"

"Sure, Officer. Just needed to stop and pray a bit."

His eyes fall to the bottom of my suit jacket, and his face tries to remain expressionless. "You'd be safer at the church. You have a good night."

Dude drives off in the black-and-white right past a man staggering out of the shadows toward me up Irvington Avenue. It's Mowatt, the town drunk, and before the night's over they'll probably pick him up again.

I jerk a k-turn, my flesh and my spirit warring. I really don't know if I'm going back to confront Anemone to tell her, this time in no uncertain terms, to cease and desist once and for all, or to surrender. I pull into her driveway, my heart racing, my head pounding, but I can't get out of the van. It feels like forever before I back out, floor it to the church, and fling myself on the carpet of my darkened office.

"Show yourself! You owe me that much. I'm not going anywhere until you show yourself!"

I'm so wasted I fall asleep right there on the floor. When I wake up it

still seems like God is hiding, so I pray for Anemone, asking God—wherever He is—to take away her man-lust, and then I head home, yawning and trying to air out my loins, hoping no one spots me walking this way.

I break another sweat pacing up the hill to the corner of Academy and Third. This is Belton's only modest neighborhood, home to domestics and their families back in the days when we couldn't afford to live here any other way.

Other pastors refer to this old side-hall colonial as 1313 Mockingbird Lane, because it's a three-bedroom-one-bath-living-room-dining-room-kitchen-unfinished-basement-and-attic house of horror. The paint is peeling from its eaves and shutters, its facade looks like somebody just nailed up a bunch of tiles salvaged from the roofs of old outhouses, its floors lean so badly that nothing on wheels ever stays in one place, and its center beam is so buckled that a hydraulic steel support was installed just before I moved in to keep the house standing.

Not even Bob Vila could help this place.

And if they'd ever try to sell it the village building inspector would have a hard time deciding whether to condemn it as a safety hazard or an eyesore. I've even gotten a few calls from location scouts for grade-B gore-and-score flicks, and last Halloween Tamara Green from the local access cable program Eye on Belton Three asked to do a special on it.

Of course, Thorn says the church voted that the pastor had to live in this deathtrap. Something about preserving the tax exemption on it. But, hey, maybe one morning I'll wake up in the basement surrounded by the rest of the second floor, or develop asbestosis. Then with the insurance or lawsuit money I'll be able to buy my own house, compliments of Thorn's stinginess. I'd be crippled or terminally ill, but I'd finally be a homeowner. And caught up in my payments to Barney. Oh, that's right, I forgot again; believers can't sue believers. Even if they're questionable ones like Thorn.

There are only two things that make living at Munster Hall bearable while I work on my plan to buy my own house. I don't need to live like Cornel Brown or Reverend Ike because there's no longer anyone in my life I need to impress. And I like being able to walk two blocks to work

every day. Other than that it just annoys the heck out of me that in a congregation where almost everyone is living well they're okay with requiring their spiritual leader to live like Eddie Munster.

I kick the freshly laid arrangement of chicken bones and feathers off the stoop and into the company of the others in the shrubbery below and enter the gallery. The mail slot rattles as I close the door, and sure enough, I've got mail. Waiting for me on the floor. Past due notices from Visa, Mobil, Belton Satellite Systems and New York State Higher Education Services Corporation.

Aside from the overdue bills there's one other letter. No return address. A Belton postmark. And inside? A three-by-five card. Why did I even bother opening and reading it? They always say the same thing the ones at the church do. Getting a little nastier lately, though. More violent.

I kick the front door behind me and it sounds like a dungeon door slamming. I climb the creaky stairs covered in a marbled shag the colors of dried mustard and sewage sludge that maintains the outhouse motif throughout. I've asked the trustees to let me rip the carpet out since there's supposedly hardwood floors underneath, but Thorn refuses to green light it.

It's still cool upstairs, almost frigid, so I'm glad I left running the window units that I put in last year. I shuffle over to the air conditioner to adjust it down and notice a black conversion van slowly turning the corner from Academy onto Third with its lights off. It stops for a couple of seconds in front of my backyard driveway, and then pulls off in a hurry up Third. Normally I would think *car thieves looking for the right model to fill an order*, but I've seen that same van do the same thing for the past seven days and no one has tried to swipe my car yet.

I've gone from wasted to drained, have my weekly eight o'clock with Burro in the morning, a nine o'clock at Village Hall, and another long day of sermon wrestling after that, so I don't have any spare energy to burn trying to figure out who's sending me the threatening letters, or who's driving that van.

My answering machine is blinking so I check the message. My mom again, appealing to my sense of compassion this time to get me to call my father for Father's Day.

Bishop Hook and I haven't spoken since the day I took this church rather than accept his offer of one four times larger in his organization. We never really spoke much before either. He hitched to this country from Belize three years before my birth, against his own father's wishes, put himself through bible college and has been accustomed to having the width of his parsonage, the splay of his ties, and scope of his theology the same way ever since: narrow.

So, I'm interested in nothing but the essentials of my bedtime ritual. I peel off my suit in ten seconds flat, punch into my white terry cloth robe, and whisk into what has to be the most ill-conceived bathroom in architectural history. I twist shut, as best as I can, the mini-blinds guarding the big, street-facing picture window in front of the tub-and-shower, and turn out the light.

When Mrs. Brewington from across the street leaned up from her walker at her husband's funeral last year and whispered in my ear that she liked my package and had been trying for fifty years to get Leon to wash his regularly like I did, I knew it was time to start showering in the dark.

I lean against the cheap tile, letting the hot water soak up some of the tired from my back, washing all the tiny hair clippings from this afternoon's haircut out of my hair. I flip the lights again, brush my teeth again, and slap some Bay Rum on my loins. Gritting my teeth all the way back to the bedroom, I refuse to let the burning conquer me.

I drop my robe next to my suit on the floor and rummage through a morass of mid-thigh length Jockey pouch briefs in my underwear drawer.

I do put cleanliness right up there next to godliness. Neatness and orderliness, too. But when you live alone you can clean up on your own schedule.

That's what I'm looking for; a pair of cotton boxers Mother Freddie bought me last month. I hate boxers. But in my present condition, I need all the air I can get down there.

I dig out a pair of running shorts and an STU tee shirt from my athletic drawer and hang them on the back of the chair, then I hop onto the bed and point the clicker at the thirteen inch next to the alarm clock on the armoire.

The basketball game is over, so after checking with my favorite weather girl, Janice Huff, to see if it's going to be smoking hot again tomorrow, I snuggle up under the covers with Dr. Seuss for our nightly trip back to a time when my life made sense. I slip into sleep in the middle of *Oh, The Places You'll Go!*, wondering if Monumental Baptist Church will be one of them.

The ringing noise jars me. I jump out of bed, stumble across to the armoire and bang on the clock, but the ringing continues. I cover my ears and look around before deciding it must be the phone. With a bearer of bad news on the other end, because I've never been awakened in the middle of the night with good tidings.

"Minister, you have to come right away," the voice crackled through the receiver, breaking up.

No one in my congregation calls me minister, and besides my parents I only know a few people with Caribbean accents. "Who is this?"

"Ike, Minister. Ik Allon."

"You're breaking up, I can hardly understand you. Are you on a cell phone?"

"I'm in my basement. I drop the phone just before I call you...it's Anemone. You have to come."

I want to say, "You need to stop buying those cheap cordless phones." I opt for, "What's wrong with her?"

"She not doing so well, Minister."

"What?!"

"She not doing too well. You have to come. Come through the basement door. Hurry."