

ONE

It seemed to her that she was floating outside herself, watching and hoping that someone would interrupt her death. It was as if her soul, her eternal being, had been released from her earthly body. She had the sense that, though there was evil in what was happening to her, there was indeed a God: a God who would save her in the end. Though she had lost her faith, *this* was the time to rekindle the fervor she had felt as a young Saint so many years ago.

If anyone can save me from the Destroyer, it would be God.

Duct tape ensured that no air could seep through the clod of earth he'd stuffed in her mouth. She was only able to breathe by drawing in cool Minnesota air through her delicate nostrils. Despite having been born beautiful, her nose wasn't her own but the work of a plastic surgeon.

Her brown eyes, the ancestry of Korea plain in their angle and the depth of their color, teared.

"Don't cry, Sister," the man said softly, as if speaking to a small child. "But for your apostasy, I'd wager that your soul is free of blight, that your destiny is the highest level of the Kingdom."

The man's words only increased the flow of moisture from the woman's tear ducts. She was shivering. Her nakedness, normally a source of pride given her slender build, her athleticism, and her saline-enhanced breasts was distressing in the presence of a complete stranger. But the man's actions, his brief words, and the resolve with which he did his work made it clear he was not interested in raping her. Indeed: His gloved hands had passed over her with disdain, without the slightest hesitation, as if she was a package being wrapped for Christmas. He had effortlessly bound her wrists and ankles with white plastic zip ties and strapped her naked body to a northern forest spruce with blue nylon cord.

Pieces of earth worked towards the back of her throat. Her spine shuddered against the spruce. Flecks of blood appeared on her bare back where bark irritated skin: Her blood did not flow cleanly in the autumnal air but oozed slowly, as if suspended in time, as the man finished his work.

Maybe he's after money.

The dirt worked its way further to the rear of her mouth. To take her mind off choking, she thought of her husband, Mitch, and her daughter, Molly. They were at a Timberwolves game. Mitch would be sipping on a beer. He'd allow himself one and no more. Molly would be charged up on whichever caffeinated soda the Target Center served.

The woman considered her naked body. She had gone to the plastic surgeon before Mitch, before Molly; when she was a reporter at a Twin Cities television station trying to get airtime, trying to get noticed and move on to a bigger market. Though that had been her dream and the reason for her new nose and breasts, she wasn't a big-city girl. In fact, her love of wilderness had led to her predicament.

She'd shouldered her kayak and hiked a barely discernible portage off Seagull Lake. The sun was high and the sky was azure; the shade of blue that defines a great fall day in Minnesota's Arrowhead region. The temperature was in the low sixties. She carried a plastic refillable bottle of water complimented with hotel ice, a bag of trail mix, and an orange; all cached in the kayak's waterproof compartment. A single paddle—aluminum shafted and double-tipped with black plastic blades—was bungeed to the kayak's frame as she began the arduous trek up the trail to Lost Lake. She'd labored over the portage: a trail that hadn't been maintained in years. Deadfall and leaves concealed twists and turns in the path, forcing her to retrace her footsteps to make progress. She wore a life vest; a one-piece neoprene kayaking suit over her torso, her upper arms, and her thighs; and neoprene water shoes. A Fitger's baseball cap, a cap she'd picked up while staying at the historic brewery and hotel in Duluth, sat tight against her scalp; her jet black hair pulled into a pony tail and passed through the opening above the cap's adjustable strap. She left her wedding ring and other jewelry in the glove box of her Subaru in the parking lot of the Superior National Forest campground on the eastern shore of Seagull Lake where she'd launched the kayak.

She'd paddled Lost Lake by herself, ducking into the shallows of the irregular lakeshore, marveling at the fifty-foot-high cliffs that isolated the place from the outside world. She explored the narrow, winding lake, the watercourse running roughly east to west, in the company of a pair of soaring bald eagles. She'd watched a cow moose and her calf stand aloof and silent in belly deep black water, their heads methodically swiveling as they ate lily pads. When the woman grew thirsty, she pulled into a tiny rock cove, dragged the kayak onto an outcropping, and sat on stony ground, plastic water jug to her lips, praising whoever created the world she was privileged to occupy. She ate handfuls of trail mix: the raisins,

peanuts, and M&Ms giving her nearly instant energy; and peeled and ate the orange before sliding the kayak back into the water and paddling across quiet stillness.

She'd been startled to see a motorized boat, a narrow aluminum rental with a ten-horse Honda four stroke, waiting at the Seagull end of the portage. She hadn't considered that anyone would be interested in walking a half-mile through the desolation of northeastern Minnesota's boreal forest to arrive at a small lake that held marginal pike and scrawny perch. But there it was: a boat, loaded with fishing gear, at the trailhead, when she made her way back to Seagull.

A stranger, a man slightly older than her, had appeared from deep within the evergreen canopy. She presumed he'd been relieving himself because he seemed a bit sheepish when they met.

"Angelina DeAquila," she said firmly, offering her hand to the stranger.

The man was dressed for fishing; a khaki fly vest, the pockets bulging, flies and tiny spoons attached to patches of soft lamb's wool by their hooks; an Australian-style bush hat, the brim crumpled and distressed sat tight on his head. Shadow caused by the hat's brim concealed the details of the stranger's face. The man wore faded Levi's and a pair of Red Wing work boots, the brown leather of the boots oiled to shiny perfection.

"Aren't you a writer for the *Minneapolis Star Tribune*?" the man asked as he shook her hand. He didn't remove his canvas work gloves when returning her gesture. He chewed gum meticulously. A faint scent of licorice emanated from the man's breath as he spoke.

It hadn't struck her at the time, but came to her later, after the Taser took her down to the soft, leafy earth, that the fisherman hadn't offered up his name in response to her introduction.

"Yes. How did you know that?" she'd replied.

Her own question had a basis in fact. When she'd been on television, before accepting her present job, she'd been far more visible. Granted, a GIF of her face appeared alongside her column in the *Star Tribune*, but the picture was barely noticeable. The fisherman's insight caused her pause. Not alarm. Just pause.

By the time she regained her ability to move, it was too late. He'd already stripped her of her life vest, suit, and shoes, rolled her onto her bare stomach, and secured her limbs with zip ties. When she cried out, he rolled her onto her back, shoved dirt between her grimaced teeth, and duct taped her mouth. The man was efficient: he wasted little effort in dealing with her protests.

Why is this happening to me?

Her nostrils filled with the taste of moist earth tinged with the odor of decaying leaves. The connection between the dead foliage and her own situation caused her to resume sobbing.

"There, there, Sister. It will be over soon."

Over? What does he mean, "over"?

Her eyes widened as the man left her side. She tried to think of something, anything that she could do to free her mouth of the dirt and the tape so that her voice could be heard across the calm waters of Seagull Lake.

There are others out fishing. Maybe they will hear me.

But the man's thoroughness made any effort at speech impossible. She tried to swallow some of the dirt but the clod hung up in the back of her throat. She started to choke.

Maybe that would be better.

He dragged her kayak, clothing, and gear deep into the woods. When she struggled to breathe, the man hurried back. His gloved fists pounded her bare flanks until the dirt broke free and descended.

"That won't help," he cautioned in a soft voice, a voice at odds with his actions. "You'll just make matters worse. Focus on the Lord for He will deliver you from all travails," the man said in a delicate and caring tone. "Remember your scripture: '*Were the bands of death broken and the chains of hell which encircled them about, were they loosed? Yea, they were loosed, and their souls did expand, and they did sing redeeming love.*'"

It was then, as he studied her closely, that she realized how clear and purposeful the man's blue eyes seemed. Her hysteria lessened and she studied her abductor with false optimism.

He's going to ask for money and then, when he gets what he wants, he'll tell Mitch where to find me.

The suddenness of the filet knife slicing her throat, the searing pain as the delicate blade separated her carotid artery and disrupted the flow of blood to her brain, caught Angelina DeAquila completely unprepared for the Hereafter.