

Ashes to Ashes

Though the clinical smell of the county morgue was by no means pleasant, it beat the stench of death at a crime scene. The poor shlubs inside the orderly metal boxes back in the crypt room were just as dead. Rahne O'Connor's mind rarely strayed from the fact that in one of the cold, dark rectangular containers, Trent's body lay empty of his once vibrant soul.

The mood in the medical examiner's office couldn't have been more subdued. Rahne sat in the chair on the guest side of the chief's desk, her legs crossed and her arms folded across her chest. Her black suit pants were crinkled, but she couldn't have cared less. Ford Blankenship, who Rahne suspected had been sent to keep her under control by Sgt. Kalif, was sitting in a chair off to the side. As usual, he was in his blue police uniform, the star on his chest polished to an almost unbearable shine.

The medical examiner was leaning back dangerously in her light tan leather chair that had seen better days. The same could be said for the M.E. herself, actually. She'd apparently had a rough time after filling in for the person who normally worked the night shift. She had pulled her shoulder-length red hair into a tight ponytail, but brittle-looking strands strayed from the order in a number of spots. Her normally pale skin was a shade of white typically reserved for her clients. Though Charlotte Rafferty's disposition rarely strayed from exuberant, she recognized that today was not in the range of normal.

All of their eyes tracked periodically to the door. Not only was Trent's mom a bitch, she was late as well. Rahne desperately wanted to tell Charlotte to surrender the body and Rahne would take Trent away and deal with him the way he would want it. Her rational side, though, was still keeping her under control.

Twenty minutes after the appointed time, the front door buzzed and they could see on the security monitor on top of the M.E.'s file cabinet that Sherry Parkland stood in the visitor's lobby. The sight of her made Rahne want to wretch. The sixty-something woman wore a short mink jacket that failed to reach her waist. A skin-tight shirt masked any naked flesh, leaving the large gap between her blouse and her hip hugger jeans a mystery. Having no desire to see the woman's body, Rahne was happy for the shrouding material. Just seeing the older woman dressed like a teenager was bad enough.

Rahne looked from the screen to Ford, who gave her a glance that clearly told her to remain calm. She planned to, even if the woman didn't deserve the benefit of the doubt. Trent would have wanted her to be civil.

The three professionals filed out of the office into the small lobby. The older woman smiled at them as they emerged. She put a hand to her chest and gave a dramatic sigh of relief. "I was beginning to think that I was in the wrong place," she said with a strong Northeastern accent. "I'm Sherry Parkland."

The M.E. nodded patiently and put out her hand. "If you're here for Trent, you're in the right place," she said.

Sherry Parkland daintily took Charlotte's hand. "Yeah, I'm here for Trent." She shook her head and cut her eyes to the floor. "Poor boy."

Charlotte looked to Rahne with sympathy and took a step to put her hand on the tall woman's shoulder. "This is Rahne O'Connor: Trent's fiancé."

"Oh," the older woman said, looking up, and up further to meet Rahne's eyes. "Hello, dear. It's nice to meet you."

Rahne tried to muster a smile. "Hello."

A moment of awkward silence settled on the room like thick, acrid smoke. The Medical Examiner clapped her hands together and rocked on her feet. "Well, I guess you have some information to give me about how Trent's remains will be handled."

"Yes," Sherry said distractedly. "I'd like to see Trent first, though."

Charlotte raised her eyebrows. "I don't think you want to do that, ma'am."

"He's my son. I'd like to see him one more time."

Rahne took a step toward the woman. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Ford mirror her motion. "You wouldn't recognize him," she said, her voice tense with emotion.

"It's been a long time and I deserve to see him again."

"Ma'am, I don't think you really want to see Trent's body." Charlotte cast a glance to Rahne, who surely looked as enraged as she felt. "I know you've been told that his body was burned beyond recognition."

"I never saw him as a man," Sherry Parkland said, her eyes tearing. "He was so independent; he left when he was eighteen." She sniffled and rubbed her nose. "I guess he wanted to see the country."

Rahne wanted to scream that he wanted to get away from her and the abusive bastards she allowed in their home. She wanted to slap the woman across her sad face until she apologized to Trent and the world.

"I'm sure Rahne has some pictures that you can look at," Charlotte volunteered, not looking at the District Attorney. "And I can let you look at the body bag. I don't think it would give you any more closure to see the body in its current condition."

Sherry looked back to the door, then to Rahne before she nodded. "Okay. After I see his body, in the bag, I'd like to see some pictures."

Rahne shot Charlotte a fiery look, but knew the woman was just trying to help. It wouldn't be so bad for the snooty-looking bitch to learn a little bit about her son. He'd been a great man and Sherry Parkland deserved to know what she'd missed. She followed everyone into the crypt room. The temperature dropped several degrees and Rahne remembered why Charlotte always wore her long-sleeved lab coat.

Charlotte, whose short legs resulted in a choppy gait, walked to the bank of twelve compartments and pulled the third one on the second row open, sliding a covered body into plain view. Sherry moved toward it in halting movements, followed by Rahne and Ford. Rahne hadn't seen the body since the firemen had pulled it out of the building's smoking wreckage. It had also been in a bag that night, but a stench of burning flesh had accompanied it. Rahne had been screaming as it passed her, though she had little other recollection of anything else.

Seeing Trent there on that sterile table, a week after his death, Rahne still had trouble reconciling herself with the fact that her lover was dead. Part of her, like Trent's mother, wanted to unzip the bag for a thorough look. She hoped that somehow she would see something that wasn't right, that proved the dead man was not Trent. She pushed the thought from her mind, though, knowing that she could not change what was. The thought of remembering Trent as a burned husk of a human stopped her from thinking about testing her theory.

Sherry Parkland stopped beside the table and looked at the long black bag. After a few moments, she looked to Charlotte. "You're sure it's him?" she asked.

Charlotte nodded slowly. "Yes, ma'am. Dental records. I'm sorry."

"Me too," Sherry said, a tear sliding down her cheek.

Seeing true pain on the woman's features, Rahne felt guilty for the thoughts she'd been having. Surely no matter what had happened between Trent and his mother, Sherry must have loved him.

"He left home when he was eighteen. He said he wanted to go to college in Michigan to get his degree," she sniffed, her eyes drilling into one end of the bag. She likely thought she was looking at his head and was imagining the face of the burgeoning young man she had known. "He said it was the only school that offered the program he wanted to study, but I know he just wanted away from me. Or at least Brent, my husband at the time.

"I tried to find him after that, but once he moved onto another college, he was lost to me." The woman pulled one hand up to her mouth. The other, she held out over the black bag containing Trent's body, moving it along the length of the bag without touching it.

Rahne didn't think it would have been that hard to find Trent if the woman had wanted to, but she was trying to be open-minded. She knew as well as anyone that without someone to give you that extra push, it was hard to make a change. Facing Trent for Sherry, like Rahne once had to face her father, would not have been a scenario that the woman would have been eager to initiate.

Sherry Parkland took a step back and turned away from the table. She took a deep breath and looked up to the Medical Examiner. "I'd like his body sent to the Grace Chapel Funeral Home."

Charlotte nodded before sliding the drawer closed and turned to escort everyone out of the crypt room. "He'll be there this afternoon," she said, her voice soft.

"Good. I spoke with that nice Catholic priest and he said he would officiate over the ceremony."

Rahne felt a renewed explosion of anger, though she did her best to hold it back. "I know you're trying to do what you think is best, but Trent would not have wanted a funeral officiated by a priest."

As the group filtered back into the lobby, Sherry turned to Rahne. "Trent attended church services every Sunday when he was a boy. I think he would have wanted someone to say a prayer for him," Trent's mother said.

Rahne put her hands up like two stop signs. "I hate to disagree, but Trent was an atheist and absolutely wouldn't have wanted that."

The older woman shook her head. "No he wasn't and I don't care to discuss it further. The plans are already made." She waved off Rahne and moved toward the door. "Thank you for your help, Dr. Rafferty." With that, Sherry Parkland left the building.

Rahne took a step to follow her, only to be held back by a strong hand. She turned to Ford, her face a mask of fury. His expression exuded pity, and that made Rahne twice as mad. Nonetheless, she knew his intention was correct. If she followed Sherry Parkland into the parking lot, she'd most likely regret what she would say to the woman. Rahne would have her say when the time was right.



A strong Atlantic wind blew against the starboard side of the *Old Man and the Sea* and the metallic gold hull bobbed up and down in the rolling ocean waves. Edward Hollingsworth looked at his Rolex, noting that he had been heading away from the coast for thirty minutes. *Probably far enough*, he thought, shifting the boat into neutral.

Heather Patterson was below deck, most likely continuing to get sauced up to calm her scrambled nerves. Edward decided the previous night that they needed some time alone to talk. They also needed to discard a certain object that could prove troublesome to them both if it was ever found.

Edward pulled on his thick down jacket and walked to the opening of the stairwell into the depths of the yacht. "Heather, get your coat and come out onto the deck with me," he called.

Stepping out on the deck, Edward began thinking about how few trips he'd taken like this since buying the vessel. He'd bought it primarily as a status symbol and to host parties, and for that it served its purpose well. He'd also found, though, that he actually enjoyed navigating the high seas. The morning sun warmed his face and allowed him to ignore the cold November wind slashing the deck. The water was by no means calm, rocking the boat in a rhythmic motion that would have had a lesser seaman puking in no time. Looking out at the endless blue field: dark, deep ocean below; light, lucent sky above, Edward felt truly alive in a way that he often took for granted.

He was able to enjoy the salt air for several more moments before Heather joined him and pulled his mind back to the task at hand. Even bundled up in her new full-length mink, the woman's beauty captured him. The sun blanched her skin, her ruby red lips standing out like glossy red paint on a white canvas.

"It's cold," she said as she walked to him.

"Invigorating," he countered. She smiled and gave him a deferential look. "We need to discuss a few matters," he said, turning deadly serious.

Heather's expression turned equally as grave. "I know."

"The police are enthusiastically investigating Trent Beckham's murder. The newspaper article made that clear," he said. A frightened pallor seized Heather. "I am concerned that the police may question you."

"Why? I didn't have anything to do with it," Heather said, as if trying to convince herself.

Edward needed no convincing to reach an opinion as to who killed the good doctor. "Of course not. But we must be honest and admit that you cannot account for your whereabouts on that night, that you came home smelling as if you had been in a fire, and that you had a gun."

"You think I did it?" she asked, her voice desperate.

"Did you?" Edward asked the direct question he had reserved until now.

Heather's hands clinched together over her chest. "No, I—I don't know. I still can't remember anything about that night."

Edward stepped forward and gently grasped his lover's upper arms. "My answer is no. I do not believe you killed Trent. However, if you were to tell the police what you remember from that night, and your condition when you returned to the manor, they would believe that you did." Tears began flowing down the woman's cheeks. "That is why you must tell them nothing if they question you. You should have no special memory about an otherwise ordinary night.

"If they ask about the gun registered to you, tell them that it was stolen from your car a month ago. Do you understand?"

Heather nodded and sniffled. She reached forward with both hands and clenched his coat in her fists. "I don't remember anything," she said again.

Putting his arms around her, Edward smothered Heather to his chest. She began crying in earnest, and he was sure that a trail of tears was running off his water-resistant outer layer onto the deck of the ship. With her head nestled against his shoulder, her knees bent to the point that she would likely fall if he

did not support her, Edward looked out at the endless ocean beyond the port railing.

I should handle this like a man, like my father would have, and put an end to this trouble. The dark-haired man glanced down at the tools he had assembled for his task of the day. Two large cement blocks and a six foot section of rope. *I should take the gun, put Heather out of her self-induced misery, and put her at the bottom of the ocean.* He rubbed his hands along her back as she continued to cry and envisioned how he would end her. In the past, he'd had others take care of his—issues. But the Reed Monroe incident had forced him to reconsider his modus operandi.

With a regretful sigh, Edward pushed her away to arm's length. "I do not want to see you crying over this any further. You did nothing. Know that course and live it."

She nodded and managed a half-smile. "Okay."

She has too many fringe benefits to eliminate her at this point, Edward thought. "Now go into the cabin and get the pistol. I put it in the drawer near the helm. We have work to do."



Our Beloved Son, Trent Robert Beckham

Trent Beckham passed from this world into Heavenly Father's arms on November 14. He is survived by his mother, Sherry Parkland, of New York City, and her husband, Oliver Parkland.

Trent served the Gossamer Falls community as a respected and successful psychiatrist. He graduated from Michigan State University with a Bachelor of Science degree in biology and from Harvard University with a medical degree. Trent performed his psychiatric residency at Johns Hopkins University Hospital. After he moved to Gossamer Falls, he worked in the community with troubled youth and served on the boards of several disadvantaged citizen organizations. He also maintained a private practice to serve the citizens at large.

Our beloved son will be laid to rest in the Grace Chapel Cemetery. Services will be held on November 22nd at the Grace Chapel Funeral Home. Father Greer James will preside.

Rahne applied the brakes of her Lexus a moment later than she should have as she whipped into the parking place, so she pressed twice as hard as needed to induce the car into a screeching halt. The furious woman slammed her right hand against the shifter to put the vehicle into park. Realizing that she was on the verge of becoming out of control, she forced herself to take several deep breaths and whispered to herself that she needed to calm down.

After meeting with Trent's mother and the medical examiner, the District Attorney had gone to her office to start another day of work she did not want to do. She was upset by Sherry's apparent plans for Trent's body, but Ford and Charlotte had managed to talk her out of going insane over it. Then she'd picked up the morning paper.

Rahne vaulted out of her seat and nearly sprinted into the funeral home. The sunny sky did little to dampen the bitter cold settling into the impending New England winter. The attorney had only her suit jacket, but did not notice the biting wind.

The Grace Funeral Chapel was a residential building in the colonial style, complete with columns that made it look like a mini White House. Rahne went through the front door like butter, a bell ringing out her arrival. The guestbook sat directly in front of her on a pedestal. A closed door was to the left, and an open one to the right. She followed the path of least resistance and proceeded further into the accessible room.

Sherry Parkland sat in a white, fabric covered chair beside a steel coffin. The older woman had exchanged her teeny-bopper jeans and blouse for a more respectable, and appropriate, full-length black dress. Her salt-and-pepper hair was pulled back into a tight braid, and even the makeup on her face seemed more subdued. When she looked up to Rahne, she did not smile.

"Hello, Ms. Parkland," Rahne said in her most sterile, courtroom voice.

"Hello," she said flatly.

Rahne took a deep breath and sat in one of the cafeteria chairs lined up along the wall. "I know you and Trent hadn't talked to each other lately, but I know he had deep feelings about you and wished you the best," she said. She'd made up her mind, again, to try and keep things civil if possible. With her emotions so on the edge, keeping her cool wouldn't be easy. Hopefully starting off with something positive would help.

"He was a good boy," the woman said.

Hearing this mother, who wasn't a very good one, refer to the man Rahne knew as a boy made the attorney want to erupt. "He was a good man. A man who had a lot of strongly held convictions. One thing that he felt passionately about is what would happen to him after he passed away."

The neutral look on Sherry's face gave Rahne some optimism that she might be receptive to what she was about to say.

"He did not want to have an elaborate funeral with a priest and hymns, and he certainly didn't want to be buried."

Sherry's face masked over with anger. "Trent deserves a proper funeral."

"I'm sure you feel that way, and there's nothing wrong with that. I *knew* Trent as a man. Long after he left your house. We were planning to be married and we talked about everything." Rahne fought to keep her voice level. "Trent was an atheist and I'm not, so we often discussed spiritual issues. He told me that he wanted a small memorial service at most and then to be cremated." Her eyes began tearing up as she thought about that conversation, which took place early one Saturday morning after they'd made love. "He wanted his ashes spread from the top of the waterfall because he said he'd spent the best years of his life here with me."

Sherry shook her head and stood sharply from the chair. "I'm sorry, Rahne, but I have to do what is best for my son. He needs to be buried like a civilized Christian and sent to the Lord with a blessing," she said, her voice raised.

"You can bless him all you want, but it shouldn't be done at a funeral," Rahne said loudly in return.

"Why? It doesn't matter. If he's dead and, as you claim, he believed that there is no God, he's not going to care."

Rahne stood up and took two brisk steps toward the graying woman, stopping face to face with her. "How dare you!" she yelled. "You need to take a moment and for once in your damned life think about someone other than your self. What you're doing is disrespecting the memory of the greatest man I've ever known."

"Is everything okay, ladies?" a deep voice asked from the door to the viewing room.

Both women turned swiftly to see a man Rahne assumed was the funeral director. He was a tall, thin man dressed in a dark navy suit that made his skin as white as a corpse.

"No, Ms. O'Connor needs to leave," Trent's mother said, stepping toward the man.

He looked at Rahne with sympathy. "Perhaps you should," he said.

Letting out a frustrated grunt, Rahne walked past them and through the door before turning back. "Trent spent his entire life trying to recover from what you did to him. He did a wonderful job of that and became a success despite you. If you follow through with this, there won't be another chance to make right what you've done wrong."

Her heart as heavy as the coffin behind her, Rahne left the funeral chapel.



Stuart stood in the far east wing of Hollingsworth Manor watching three men in hip-huggers strip wallpaper off the walls of a beautiful guest suite. There was nothing wrong with the room as it was, but Abigayle had requested that her parents' new home have an Asian flavor. So he'd contacted an interior designer that he knew, and his crew was only too happy to dive into the job.

Fidgeting with the top button of his baby blue polo shirt, Stuart tried to push away the thoughts clouding his head. He hated himself for being so weak that he could not fight this insane plot Abigayle had forced him into, but he hated himself even more for his inability to accept the decision he had made. What was done, was done, and he needed to get over it.

If it didn't hurt so damned much, that would be easy.

"Hey big brother," Harris said, coming up from behind him.

His pleasant little brother's voice always brought a smile to Stuart's face. He turned his head to acknowledge the stout man as he walked up beside him. "Hi. Coming to watch the fun?"

"I've got to admit, I'm curious."

Looking down at Harris' familiar khakis and plaid shirt, Stuart wondered if his brother ever strayed out of the Dockers section when he went clothes shopping.

"I'm not sure what it will look like when they're done, but I'm expecting a pink pagoda."

"Are they making it so everyone has to sit on the floor to eat?" Harris asked.

Stuart laughed. All topics came back to food for Harris. "No. They've been in this country for at least twenty-five years, so they want American-style furniture. And besides, that's Japanese. The Nguyens are from Vietnam."

"Oh, yeah," Harris muttered.

They watched the three designers as they prepared fresh wallpaper to slap on the blank surfaces. The paper appeared to be a dark red with flowers and Asian symbols in vertical rows. If they put the pattern on every wall, Stuart knew he wouldn't be able to come into the room without craving Chinese food.

"I'm hungry," Harris said.

Stuart laughed and slapped his brother on the back. "Me too. If watching these guys wasn't so damned interesting, I'd take you to the kitchen for one of Molly's special snacks."

Harris chuckled with him and they watched as the men began hanging paper along the far wall. Stuart thought hanging the paper looked more difficult and tedious than his high-strung nature could ever tolerate. The men expertly aligned the edges of the paper before letting it softly contact the wall. They then scrubbed it with a sponge as if it were made of steel. He had to assume they knew what they were doing.

"H-hey," Harris stammered. "Can I ask you something?"

"You just did," Stuart said. Judging by Harris' sudden change in demeanor, he doubted he wanted to hear the question at all.

"Why are you doing this?"

Stuart's shoulders tightened. He didn't want to be in the position to lie directly to his brother, though he supposed his whole life at this point was essentially a lie. "Maybe I'm going for the American dream."

"I don't believe you're in love with this woman," Harris said plainly. "Are you?"

Feeling his chest contract, Stuart kept his eyes on the workers. "You don't know Abigayle like I do."

Harris paused for a moment, waiting on him to say more. "That didn't answer my question."

"I'm going to marry her. That should tell you all you need to know," Stuart said.

The chubby man shook his head. "I just want you to be happy. I'm afraid if you go through with this, that will never happen."

Stuart had the exact same fear. "Don't worry, Harris. Somehow, sometime, I will be happy."

Silence settled over them. As they watched the decorators, Stuart wondered if he would ever truly believe that he would be happy.



Rahne leaned against her desk, head in hand, her elbow buried in a stack of papers. She'd been in her office for the last four hours, punching keys on the computer, answering phone calls, and moving papers from one spot to another. In the scheme of all the work she had to do, however, she was getting nothing done. Her run-ins with Sherry Parkland had left her drained and ten times as depressed as she had been.

The image of his body, remarkably undamaged from his death, in the metal gray coffin refused to leave her mind. People would come into the chapel, sign the guest book, look at the flowers surrounding the box, then walk out. They would think a few last thoughts of Trent, then say goodbye to him forever. For most of the people who viewed the casket and came to the funeral, Trent would forever be that great guy they once knew who died so tragically. A thought of him would bring a smile to their faces, and a little pang to their hearts. But by and large, they would be finished with him.

Rahne wasn't done yet. She wasn't even close to being done. Now that he was gone, it was easy to recognize all the time she'd wasted not loving Trent how he deserved. All he'd wanted from her for years was for her to tell him that she loved him and to agree to marry him. Not much at all. And the crazy thing was that she did love him almost from the moment they'd met. What would have been so hard, or wrong, about marrying him, she didn't know. Trent was gone now and she'd never have the chance to correct that mistake. Unlike his acquaintances who would hardly think of him for the rest of their lives, Rahne knew she'd have to live with all the little ways she'd failed Trent every minute, of every day, for the rest of her life.

The tears started slowly. The sob in her chest came as a surprise to Rahne even as it emerged. She didn't try to stop the ones that followed. Instead, she embraced them as the only way she could get some small measure of relief. The episode seemed to last forever, but when she finally felt as though she could stop crying, she gladly noted that her door was closed and no one seemed to have noticed the outburst.

Trent would have hated what his mother was doing. Rahne didn't share his atheistic beliefs, but she'd always respected that Trent believed in them strongly. He was open-minded enough to acknowledge the validity of Rahne's Catholic faith, as lapsed as she usually was. Nonetheless, the thought of a priest saying a prayer over him would have been offensive. His mother cared for no one but herself. Why she thought she needed to make a show of her son's funeral baffled the attorney.

Rahne wished she had a case enthralling enough to take her mind off the whole situation. Unfortunately, of all the cases she had, they were either boring, simple, or at a dead end. Trent's investigation was no different. She couldn't get a search warrant for Hollingsworth Manor to save her life, and she was afraid that questioning Heather Patterson before doing that would ruin any chance she might have to obtain physical evidence. If she built a case against Heather Patterson that was only circumstantial and the Hollingsworths paid for her defense, there would be no way she could win. With enough money, there was almost always reasonable doubt.

Since the only thing she could think of for the last two days was Trent's body being defiled by his mother, she had considered filing a lawsuit to stop his burial. It didn't take long to dismiss the idea though. Trent may not have liked what she was doing, but he would have been even more mortified by Rahne making the dispute public. Not to mention that without a certified marriage, she had no chance of being granted rights to control his disposition, no matter how much of a bitch his mother was.

No, she'd have to make the best of the situation as it found her. With an image of Trent's handsome face in her mind, a light stubble darkening his cheeks and a wide smile showing his perfect white teeth, Rahne calmed her mind and tried to turn it back to her work.



Throughout the service, Rahne had noticed a healthy supply of covert glances her way. Sitting near the back like a barely known acquaintance, she hadn't even tried to sit in the front rows of the chapel. She didn't think she could stand sharing the same space with Sherry Parkland. Though Rahne barely noticed, the

church was really beautifully decorated, if she let her senses get past the fact that this kind of ceremony should not have been happening. The church pews held at least 200 solemn friends, patients, and colleagues of the great Dr. Beckham. Their faces were as dreary and depressed as the dying purple mums spread along the top of the coffin.

Rahne hadn't expected to have her own section of support, but she'd been greeted by welcoming friends when she arrived at the building. Harris Hollingsworth sat beside her, periodically patting her white linen-covered knee when he felt she needed a little extra support. He was cute in his dark blue suit and matching tie. On his far side, Kris Hollingsworth watched the proceeding. She'd been very gracious, offering condolences in a concise and caring manner, and even admitting that she was there to write an article for the *Gossamer Falls Gazette*. She looked very elegant in a knee-length black skirt and matching silk shirt.

Then there was Ford, who sat on the other side of Rahne, blocking her from the aisle. He was dressed in a black polyester suit with a thin black tie. He caught her eye when she first saw him, and Rahne had to wonder if she'd ever seen him out of uniform before. She was sure she had, yet a clear image of him in khakis or blue jeans would not recall. He was a man, a normal person like anyone else, but Rahne had trouble thinking of him as anything other than a cop.

Father Greer had spoken at the podium first. Rahne actually considered his speech better than most of his masses. Nonetheless, it had been long and boring, and she was glad it was over. He announced that Sherry Parkland wanted to say a few words, and Rahne's blood began to run cold.

The woman wore a conservative black dress that highlighted a slim build that most likely did not come from diet and exercise. She had her graying hair pulled back into a prim bun. Her cheeks had extra blush, making the remainder of her pale skin abnormally white.

"Thank you all for coming." She surveyed the crowd as if she knew anyone in it. "My son would be honored to know that you cared enough to give him a final farewell. Trent sacrificed greatly to be able to serve you all. I'm pleased he apparently did it so well." Sherry Parkland took a deep breath, and though Rahne wasn't close enough to see her tears, the woman looked as though she were choking back emotion. "I didn't get a chance to see him in action, but I was never as proud of Trent as I am today," she said.

Rahne could feel her anger rising rapidly. The woman had no right to breathe even Trent's name, much less talk about being proud of him. It was way too late for that.

“Trent was always hard to get close to,” Sherry continued. “He was such an independent boy. Handsome and smart. I never knew him to be close to anyone other than the Lord.”

Unable to control herself any longer, Rahne turned toward the aisle and stood. Ford reached out and grabbed her hand, trying to keep her in place. She looked into his sympathetic brown eyes and shook her head. The policeman sighed heavily, but released her.

“Despite the loss we have all suffered through this tragedy, I am pleased that Trent has gone to a better place,” Sherry said.

Rahne walked between the pews full of some of Gossamer Falls’ wealthiest citizens. People who would vote for, or against, her in the next election. That, or the low murmur of voices behind her, didn’t seem to matter much. As she reached the podium, she could indeed see that Trent’s mother’s cheeks were wet with tears. Her eyes, however, didn’t seem to hold any sadness at all. In fact, the gleam in her eye looked more like she was accepting some kind of award.

Sherry Parkland’s cool blue eyes grew wide as she realized that Rahne intended to replace her before she was done. The woman’s lips tightened to a grim slit and her body tensed for confrontation. Almost to Rahne’s disappointment, the woman stepped away from her approach and returned to the first bench, front and center.

Rahne took a deep breath to harness her wildly flowing emotions. “I hate to disagree with Ms. Parkland, but most everything she just said was untrue.” Another low register of whispers swept the room. “Anyone who knew Trent—really knew him beyond reading his résumé—would know that. Trent was a quiet and thoughtful man who wasn’t at all close to the Lord, because he didn’t believe in Him, but he didn’t fault others because they did.

“Trent would have been appalled at being forced to be part of this spectacle here today. He wanted a small remembrance celebration by his friends, and for everyone else who knew him to be spared the stress and inconvenience of a formal funeral. He believed they were a colossal waste of time and emotion. He wouldn’t want people who barely knew him to give his last biography.” The attorney looked pointedly at Trent’s mother.

“Above everything he could have chosen to embrace in this world, Trent believed in now. He believed that every minute was worth savoring, either by learning or loving or otherwise seizing the day. He tried to help his patients rise up so that they could get past their problems and make the most of each day. He hated to

see people wallowing in pity or sorrow. He never did, though he had much to feel sorry about. And that's why he would have hated this service today."

By the way no one seemed to be looking her in the eye, she knew most of the attendees were uncomfortable by her speech. Today wasn't about her, or them, for that matter. The silence around her that might have made another person lose their nerve only reminded her of Trent and his idea of nothingness, and spurred her on.

"Trent loved the basic nature of man as well as animal. He loved the balance struck by Mother Earth and the opportunity he had been given to explore Her wonders. He knew about nature and valued it. Trent wouldn't have wanted to be shoved in a box in the ground for time and worms to devour. Most of all, he wouldn't want to contribute to the waste of space that he thought cemeteries were.

"What Trent really wanted out of life was peace: within himself, for those he counseled, and for everyone who wanted it. I'm glad for him, and myself, that we had reached a pinnacle in our relationship and were truly happy. It didn't last long, but it lasted long enough so that I think one day, when the pain is gone, I'll be able to find a little bit of peace within myself where Trent is concerned. I hope all of you can do the same."

Rahne nodded, seeing more faces looking into hers. The emotions were varied from sympathy to offense. One thing was constant, though, and that was that each person before her understood Trent a little better than they otherwise might have.

With reverent silence still surrounding her, the ramrod-straight attorney walked away from the podium, between the rows of filled church pews, out of the chapel, and a little further away from the hole in her heart that Trent had once filled.