

## CHAPTER ONE

The first indication of pending attack was anything but subtle. Obsidian bands eclipsed the outermost edges of his sight and grew inward. His vision narrowed, until it seemed as if he peered through the wrong end of a telescope at a writhing tangle of cadmium yellow, burnt orange, impenetrable emerald and cobalt blue that only seconds before had been a wheat field, cypress trees and haze beneath a relentless sun. One moment fused with the next and now the tangle of colors spiraled high, paused, dove and would have slammed into him had it not banked away at the last possible instant.

“Oh my — look at him.”

“What on earth . . . ?”

“What is he doing?”

“Is he possessed? The way his head is movin’, it’s like he’s possessed. Do y’all see that?”

Oh my Lord in Heaven, the Devil has reached up and grabbed hold of this poor man.”

Tension in the voices led the way out. As the painter regained his senses, it occurred to him his head had been listing this way and that as if the tendons of his neck had gone slack. He wanted to stomp and shout for added distraction but tremors and lightheadedness threatened to drop him. A grown man floundering about, scattering the sandy soil would not be a pleasant site.

Quentin wondered what they would do then -- call 911 and shield him from the sun, or jump into that big-ass car of theirs and race away from a madman?

He squeezed his eyes shut and sucked in air thick as soup, held it there while straining every muscle in his body. Only when his lungs threatened to burn through his ribs did he allow the air to gush forth. Purple and white dots blinked around him. He gasped and eventually caught his breath. Dots faded ... and were gone. Tension drained from his body. Limbs responded to his wishes once more. The obsidian bands vanished. The tangle of color became a wheat field with cypress trees and a blue haze and fiery sun once more.

A temporary fix. He should get out from beneath the overwhelming sky and punishing sun, run like hell to that thicket over there and huddle against a tree trunk until it passed. That would be the safe thing to do.

Color erupted from the canvas before him.

. . . but he had come so far on the painting. He could not abandon it now, not even temporarily. He would have to pay the price.

He gnawed the end of the paintbrush and eyed the half-empty bottle of tequila that lurked in the shadow of the easel. Another pull might just postpone the inevitable long enough to let him

finish.

The air around him swelled.

Too soon after the last. He'd kept it away this long by painting. If he continued, he might be able to handle it. He simply needed to keep —

The air crackled and hummed, as if he were surrounded by live wires ready to fry him with the slightest contact.

As was often the case, the act of painting had warded off its initial advances. He was nearly finished with this, his second canvas of the day. His faded blue t-shirt, smeared here and there with paint, clung to his upper body. His cutoffs were similarly smeared and just as wet, though the denim held true to its own form despite the loose fit at his waist and thighs. Willpower trickled from him as if carried through his pores by his sweat. Concentration slipped. Limbs took longer to respond, as if the sun had thickened the air around him into an invisible quagmire.

Some would say this was no more than the heat taking its toll on a man foolish enough to spend hours out in it, foolish enough to believe a straw hat could protect him from heatstroke. But though formidable, Quentin knew the heat was not directly responsible; he'd painted many times in the heat with far less trouble. Nor was hunger the culprit; more often than not his stomach was empty when he painted. No, this was the work of an adversary so familiar it was intimate, and one that grew stronger with the death of each day.

His broad shoulders hunched forward as if he needed warmth, impossible on a day such as this. He raised his hand. The deep creases of his palm glistened with sweat and called to mind an aerial view of a river delta. The hand was broad and hard, seemingly more of a laborer's tool than

an artist's. A slight crook inhabited the fingers, which betrayed him with a tremble that ordinarily would not have been there. He turned the hand over. Straight ridges of his ligaments shot from knuckles to wrist. A network of veins bulged beneath reddish skin.

He reached for the bottle, then froze.

Too late, he realized.

His adversary struck, but to his surprise not directly at him. This time it turned the air upon itself. Molecular bonds disintegrated. Billions of freed molecules, berserk with murder lust, smashed into one another everywhere around him. Silent repercussions rocked him this way and that as if he were pinned beneath a ghostly mortar barrage.

His adversary changed tactics. The air coalesced into clear, thin panes around him. Jagged fissures whip-cracked the panes, making him twitch and jerk. Whole sections broke free and shattered, one after the other, on the ground at his feet. He sat still for a moment, then tentatively reached out. The panes were gone, replaced with free-flowing air.

The first skirmishes were over.

But that's all they were. Skirmishes as strong as this meant the real assault would not go well. No way to stop it. He could only hang on and try to make it through without too much damage. He had to get moving.

He slashed now at the painting, the brush tip steeped in red lake. Bold highlights sprang to life upon the canvas. In the next instant he snatched the bloodied brush up to his mouth. As his teeth sunk into the wooden handle, his hand dove for another brush. He plunged the tip into a gob of three parts cadmium yellow deep and one part alizarin crimson. The result was so rich and

lustrous it was as if he balanced a nugget of pure gold on the palette. The brush tip became thickly impasted, so much so it appeared twice its normal size. He all but lunged for the canvas with it.

With any luck he'd finish before the true attack. With ... any ... luck!

... but what of the little matter behind him?

As if in collusion with his advancing, unseen foe, the voices behind his back — easily ignored until now — grew louder, bolder, the collective hiss of serpents roused by the scent of warm-blooded prey outside the den. Gasps and titters punctuated the whispering, with several outbursts of “My word, Sister so-and-so!” and “Oh, you don't really believe that, do you?” Increased volume led to full, unbridled conversation. Words, phrases, and exclamations shot back and forth, rapid-fire, with scarcely any pause for inhalation. Then came the quasi-passionate, almost heated exchange that churned and pressurized and finally burst into the historically predictable crescendo:

“I'll do it!”

Sudden quiet reigned now, as if the sultry breeze that bent and swayed the sea of copper and gold before the painter had scattered the irritating voices as well. Nothing would have suited him more than to forge ahead and pay the cost in the ensuing silence, but he had been here too many times for that. Each situation was slightly different — the setting, the gawkers, the season — but the order of events rarely changed. He continued his efforts, but a dead man would be hard pressed to ignore the stares that bored into his back. He strained to hear sounds of departure; doors that slammed with finality, an engine that cranked and cranked and suddenly sprang to life, shocks that squealed in protest over uneven terrain, tires that kicked up pebbles to ping against the steel

underbelly of the car as it traveled down the dirt road and away.

Away.

He didn't give a damn where -- just not here, not now, not near him. He needed to finish the painting before The Onset, and to do that he needed to remain absorbed in the moment, free of distraction.

Instead came the crunch of hard heels on sun baked earth and pebbles.

His jaw clenched.

Not now. He had to finish ...

Color pulsed on the canvas before the painter. For Quentin D'Entremont, color easily surpassed mere visual sensation. Color — and painting, of course — struck chords that could make him shudder, chords that resonated in the empty vessel some would call his soul. Long ago he embraced the idea of a soul and that a man's contribution meant something, but time and hardship had schooled him in both. While the chords resonated, Quentin found enough satisfaction to plod toward his dream, but the chords invariably fell silent with the completion of the latest work. Then it was just Quentin, and he wearied of just Quentin. Day after day he repeated the cycle. For nine years now he labored like a coal miner, often achieving artistic satisfaction ... but scant monetary reward. It would wear anyone down, especially one with his temperament. A successful painter could support a family, and a family would help fill the emptiness. He had tried for the dream many times now. Now he was afraid it was too late.

Quentin wiped the sweat from his brow with the back of his hand.

Had to be too late.

A sail of ghoulish pastel blue infiltrated his peripheral vision. Hovering over the dress was some kind of matching cloud that must have been a hat. A pale blur filled the void between the dress and the hat. Dark, expectant ovals blinked at him as he sat in the foldout stool. Like a curious emu the woman peered from himself to the canvas, to the wheat field, back to himself and back again to the canvas. Each movement was accompanied by an odoriferous assault of talcum powder and too much perfume and hair spray. The smell, overpowering though it was, suddenly called to mind his aging mother, though she had never laid it on like this.

The woman was not within conversation distance, but if she came closer, she would question his technique.

Quentin continued to paint, just as he would if she were truly disturbing him.

She would ignore his ignoring of her by clearing her throat and questioning his perspective, and pointing out items she deemed inaccurate.

Quentin assaulted the canvas with the paint-laden brush. The strokes were quick but sure. Each had a specific assignment, a specific purpose, but not all were known to him beforehand. Again and again and again the brush laid thick highlights of gold among damp copper.

The woman would try to gain his attention as grasshoppers and cicada chattered in the field that stretched all the way left and all the way right before him. Dragonflies darted and hovered and swooped, dark blips against the azure sky. A particularly large one, its body as long as the painter's middle finger, alighted upon the pinnacle of the easel. It held its four blue-spotted wings straight out from its body, as if proud of itself for gaining such lofty purchase.

The brush halted its onslaught. Quentin pursed his lips and peered closely at the dragonfly.

He decided he must sketch them before he exited the field. Yes, a few quick sketches of the winged raiders would be excellent. That assumed there would be anything left of him by the end of the day.

Sweat streaked down the sides of his face, dampened trails through the short beard to drip from his jaw. The heat, though not quite as intense as at midday when he had first set up his easel, showed no sign of relenting. The devil's breath that bent and swayed the wheat in the field did little to cool things off, despite the fact that it blew in from the nearby Atlantic Ocean. Periodically he had to gasp for an extra breath. During lulls, the air seemed thick as a salt-encrusted blanket.

The woman, the one who had volunteered as spokesperson for her group, would likely tell him she simply couldn't understand the image on his canvas.

Short, quick sideways slashes now at the painting. Quentin's hand jerked in an almost mad rhythm.

She'd ask if he could hear her. Maybe he didn't speak the native tongue, coming as he did from Canada . . . ?

Quentin swapped the golden-tipped brush for the one in his mouth. He held four in his left hand. The thumb of the same poked through the hole in the modest-sized but brightly colored palette that rested on his forearm. He plunged the tip of the new brush into the scant remains of the red lake and smeared the last open space on the palette with it. Cadmium yellow joined in. A few circles with the brush, clockwise and then counter, and suddenly he had tempered bronze. He raised the brush. Like so many times before he reached out —

The brush tip quivered an inch from the canvas. Molten lava dripped and splattered the

sandy soil between his dusty work boots.

Quentin stared, then jerked the trembling hand away from the canvas.

Breathing came harder now. The brush clunked onto the palette, splattering paint. His hand alarmingly empty, he kneaded the creased and furrowed flesh of his forehead and breathed deeply.

He drifted, fought at the confusion. Wanted the woman to keep her distance so he wouldn't feel the need to shout her away. Reminded himself that while intrusive, she was otherwise innocent.

Quentin did no more than breathe deeply for a moment. Finally he controlled himself enough to gaze upon his painting.

The woman would probably point out that he had "an absolutely delightful French accent" then smile in a motherly kind of way.

French-Canadian, he'd correct her. And before she asked, he'd tell her the difference is akin to the one between English and American English. Similar, but one comes from dwelling in England, the other from America.

She would probably glance away, not quite knowing what to do with his sarcasm, but she'd come back at him. He'd try to send her on way without being overly rude. But she would deem his time infinite, and point out that, after all, he did not have a "real job." The surge of irritation would be difficult to stifle, and would be getting more and more difficult after this point.

Quentin would nod brusquely to the painting. Time for the painter to get busy, he'd say, so she'd have to go now.

Or he could use her as distraction . . . for a while.

The woman wouldn't leave yet, of course. She would point out that she'd studied art in so many ways and was a part-time artist herself. When pressed on just what "part-time" meant, she would admit to only finding the time once or twice a week, or perhaps a month; her schedule was very full, she would say. She would also point out that many art critics were not themselves artists.

An unfortunate truth, Quentin would say.

The woman's eyes would grow wide. She would turn her head but her gaze would not leave the painter. She'd lean almost imperceptibly and observe him from the corners of her eyes as if unable to tear her gaze away.

The painter arched a knowing eyebrow. He broke his own stare and gazed down at the brush he had dropped to the palette. He'd try again in a minute. He always tried again.

Almost always.

Quentin turned. Despite her bold assertion that she'd "do it!" -- the leader had traversed precious little real estate; in fact, she was still no more than arm's length from her four cohorts. Evidently caution had mired her steps. It was as if she approached a python as it sunned itself upon a slab of obsidian. The serpent was probably dangerous, but attack did not *seem* imminent. Then again, who knew the mind of a serpent?

All five women wore pastel dresses, and hats to shield their faces from the sun. When they noticed Quentin observing them, they froze. He looked them over a final time, grunted, and turned back to his painting.

"Same old, same old," he muttered.

With a hand gone unsteady he picked up the fallen brush from the shingle-shaped palette.

He dipped the tip in a cup of turpentine, then wiped it carefully with a rag gone chaotic from thousands of scattered paint markings. He scrutinized his tray of assorted brushes. After a moment he exchanged the medium-sized brush for a slender one.

In the lower left hand corner of the painting, among the thickly impasted, coppery gold