

STOLEN

A Kieran Yeats Mystery

LINDA J WRIGHT

Copyright © 2018 by Linda J Wright

This is a work of fiction. While some of the geographical names and historical figures may be real, characters and incidents are the product of the author's imagination and are used fictionally.

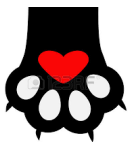
All rights reserved worldwide. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form, or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, without permission in writing from the publisher.

Published 2018
Printed in the United States of America
First Edition
ISBN 978-1-7323593-0-7
E-ISBN 978-1-7323593-1-4
Library of Congress Control Number: 2017930398

Cover Design by Word-2-Kindle

For information, contact:

Cats Paw Books
630 Hickory Street NW
Suite 120-119
Albany, OR 97321
catspaw@mail.com



For Sheila Crandles

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many people, whether they know it or not, helped bring this book into being. Some helped a lot, some helped a little, and if I've neglected to mention anyone, I'm sincerely sorry.

Thank you to my editors Katherine Forrest and Christine Cassidy. Every author needs a good editor, and I had two. Thank you to my beta reader Jac Lambert, who told me where the book worked and where it didn't. Thank you to my excellent proofreader and partner, Martha. Thank you to the amazing Derek Murphy at creativeindie.com, for his generosity about all things indie publishing. And thank you to Word-2-Kindle for their beautiful cover design.

Thank you to three poets whose work has enriched my life and informed my writing: Mary Oliver, whose poem "Praying" Kieran mentions in Chapter 1; former Oregon Poet Laureate William Stafford, whose poem "Choosing A Dog" is displayed on the wall of the Sanctuary in Chapter 12; and Ben-Hur Lampman, former Oregon Poet Laureate and associate editor of *The Portland Oregonian*, whose poem "Where To Bury A Dog" Kieran recalls in Chapter 25.

And finally, what can any of us say to all the animals (some of whom are pets) who die every day in traumatic, painful, often unnecessary experiments in researchers' labs. Thanks? Sorry? We all ought to be ashamed. And, like the fictional Kieran Yeats, perhaps we need to become speakers for the living.

About the Author

Linda J. Wright is a Canadian citizen. Born in Ontario, she grew up in a military family, and spent part of her childhood in Europe. She lived in Victoria, British Columbia, before moving to Oregon, where she now lives with her partner and their spoiled rotten cat. In the 90s, she was awarded three California Arts Council Artist-in-Residence grants to teach fiction writing to GATE high school students and won a California Association of Teachers of English Excellence Award for those classes. Writing as Lauren Wright Douglas, she won the Lambda Literary Award for Best Mystery for her second novel. *Stolen* is her eleventh novel.

An animal rights advocate, Linda has been involved in animal welfare for nearly 30 years. In 1990, she founded the rescue organization The Cat People, and served as its first President. Since then, she has served on the Boards of several animal welfare organizations and has been a consultant to dozens of animal rescue/welfare groups. In 1999 she was part of the team that rescued Keiko the orca (the real Free Willy) and rehabilitated him in Newport, Oregon, setting him free off Iceland. She continues to advocate for animals through her writing.

MONDAY

CHAPTER 1

A barrage of door-pounding jolted me out of sleep. I cracked an eye open and read the time on my bedside clock . . . 3:48. What the hell? Who comes pounding on your door at three in the morning? I grabbed my sweats from the floor, my .38 from the closet, and hurried out of the bedroom.

Dressing clumsily in my enclosed back porch, I apologized to my feral, Vlad, who cackled at me from his perch in the rafters. Mindful of the fact that over the years I've irritated more than a few people, I eased open the door and padded quietly through the not-quite-spring grass to the front of the house, soaking my socks.

Peering through the screen of rhododendron bushes, I saw a small, skinny kid on the front porch give my door another couple of whacks. Hardly an intimidating sight. Maybe grabbing my gun had been a bit of overkill.

“Kieran! Open the door!” the kid yelled.

“Hey, knock it off!” I said, coming around the corner of the house. I was cold, hung over, and ticked off. And I had a headache the size of Newfoundland which the door-pounding had not improved.

“It’s Jen,” a small voice answered. “And I’m sorry for the racket.”

The kid stepped into the light cast by the streetlamp: a small, slender girl of about thirteen, hands jammed into the pockets of a black leather jacket, teeth chattering. My goddaughter Jen, who should have been home in bed where all kids are at three in the morning. A bicycle stood propped against the porch railing.

“What’s up?” I called, thoroughly mystified at this middle-of-the-night drama.

“Why aren’t you answering your phone?” she wailed.

“My phone? It’s in a bag of rice. I dropped it in a sinkful of water. Jen, what are you doing here?” A spider of fear walked across the back of my neck. “Is everything all right?” Dumb question. Of course everything was not all right.

“My life is ruined,” Jen said. “Apart from that, everything’s all right.”

I sat at the kitchen table with Jen, waiting for her to talk, feeling guilty for yelling at her. My portly grey cat Trey sat on the table between us, regarding Jen with fierce intensity – the feline equivalent of worry. “It’s okay,” I told Trey, patting his head. The coffeemaker burbled on the counter behind me. I had hopes that a large infusion of caffeine would nudge my sluggish brain out of neutral where it now idled.

“You’re not pregnant, are you?” I asked Jen, a sudden awful thought occurring to me.

“Kieran, I’m only thirteen,” she exclaimed in horror. “I haven’t even started, well, you know . . .” she trailed off in evident embarrassment. “And by the way, you missed my birthday.”

Yeah, well, I had undoubtedly missed a lot of things over the past little while. I was in a depressive funk. My own March Madness. And I had lied to Jen about my phone. It wasn’t in a bag of rice. It was in my bedside table drawer, powered off. I simply didn’t want to talk to anyone. Through the murk of my hangover and headache, I tried to focus in on what Jen was telling me. But it was not making much sense.

“The cats at Wild At Heart,” I said, repeating what she had told me on the way into the house. “They’re gone. All eleven of them. The cattery’s empty. They’ve . . . disappeared.”

“Yes!” she yelled, fists clenched, evidently wanting to strangle someone. “And Norma Carruthers is going to kill me. She’ll do worse than kill me. She’ll never hire me again. She’ll think this is all my fault.”

To her credit, she was not blubbering. She wasn’t a crier. But she was clearly pretty damned upset.

I got up and poured coffee for myself. Deciding that Jen was too young to start a caffeine addiction, I put a mugful of water in the microwave and made instant cocoa for her. “Drink this,” I said firmly. “And maybe take your jacket off.”

She nodded miserably, pulling off her jacket and hanging it over the back of her chair. Underneath was a black T-shirt featuring the head of a snarling tiger. I got it. She was a precocious thirteen-year-old in her first year at a new school. She was telling the world she was a tough kid. But right now she was a scared-to-death kid.

“Take a deep breath, kiddo. Just tell me what happened.”

She looked up at me, lips pressed together, dark eyes huge with fear. “I fell asleep with my earbuds in, listening to my iPod,” she said. “My music assignment. We’re supposed to re-imagine an opera and my friend Donovan and I chose the rock opera *Tommy*. I recorded what we’ve done so far and I was listening to it.” She looked furtively into the corners of the kitchen as if goblins might spring out and grab her.

I took a few swigs of coffee. A little less about the re-imagined opera and more about the cats would be swell. I told myself to be patient. Let the kid tell the story in her own way.

“Norma’s gone to Ottawa for a cat show,” she explained, calming down a little. “She hired me to stay in the house and look after the cattery for a few days. I’ve been dropping by after school for about two weeks, working with a kitten from the latest litter. He’s small and, well, a little timid. Norma wanted me to give him some extra attention. Build up his confidence so he would be more adoptable.” She ran a hand through her messy, short dark hair, making her spikes even spikier.

“You’re staying at Norma’s for a few days . . . what about school?” I asked her.

“It’s spring break, Kieran,” she pointed out acerbically.

“Oh yeah, that. Okay, you were taking care of the place, and last night you fell asleep. When you woke up, the cats were just . . . gone?”

“Yes!” she said miserably. “Something told me to go downstairs and check on them. The cage doors were all standing open, and the cages were empty. Empty!” A note of panic edged into her voice.

This was certainly odd, but maybe there was a simple explanation for it. “Now, don’t get mad at me, but you’re sure, right? You looked and they aren’t just . . . somewhere else in the house, you know, playing, or hiding, or sleeping?”

She gave me a withering look. “It’s a *cattery*, Kieran. These aren’t pets. Well, some of them might be later, but not now. They don’t play in the house. The cattery is nice and homey, you know, sofas and cat trees and all that. But they go back in their cages at night. They’re valuable animals. Pet quality Bengal kittens sell for a thousand to fifteen hundred dollars apiece. Show quality Bengals sell for up to five thousand dollars.”

It took me a moment to process this. Fifteen hundred dollars for a kitten? I paid less for my Karmann Ghia’s reconditioned engine. “Yeah, that’s valuable all right. And they didn’t get out?”

She looked at me incredulously, eyes wide. “You mean out of the *house*?”

Obviously I was not doing a good job with my questions.

“No. No way,” she said firmly. “I put everyone in their cages and made sure the latches were closed. I’ve done the same thing dozens of times.” She looked at me in what was clearly panicked horror. “You do believe me, don’t you?”

“Of course I believe you,” I said loyally, but dammit, part of me, well, doubted. This was too screwy. “I’m just trying to figure out what happened.”

“What happened is that I went to sleep and the cats disappeared and it’s my fault.”

“No, it’s not your fault. From what you’re telling me, you didn’t do anything wrong. But something happened when you were asleep. The only thing that makes sense is that someone got in and took the cats.”

Jen said nothing, hunched miserably over her cocoa.

“Right?”

She shrugged. “Yes. No. I guess so. But how? How would anyone get in? There’s an alarm system.”

Oh, brother. This called for another large swig of coffee. C’mon brain, wake up. “And the alarm didn’t go off?”

“Nope. I would have heard it. And it was set when I got up to check the cats. No one could have gotten in the house. I was the only one there.” She began to babble. “People will think I did it. Or at least I had a hand in it.” Her eyes pleaded with me. *Please believe me, Kieran*, they seemed to say.

“Well, you didn’t do it and you didn’t have a hand in it,” I reassured her. “That’s that. It must have been someone else.”

She nodded, studying the depths of her cocoa mug. Then she looked up at me. “Kieran, will you try to figure out what happened? Where the cats went and who did it? How to get them back? You know, take this on like, take it on as a case? I mean, you’re an animal crimes investigator. This is the kind of thing you do, right?”

I groaned. Yeah, sure, this was what I did – investigate crimes involving animals - - but I was not quite at my best. Hadn’t been for a couple of weeks. I’d fallen down the rabbit hole of my annual depression again, which for me meant listening to minor-key

music, reading my famous forebear William Butler's poetry, and drinking too much Method and Madness Single Malt Irish Whiskey.

Jen must have misinterpreted my silence. "I know what you charge," she said in a small voice. "I can pay you. I have a savings account."

"Oh, Jen," I said. "It's not the money." Although she had a point. I charge five hundred dollars a day plus expenses. A thousand up front. Ah yes, my time was so damned valuable. After all, someone has to reimburse me for those hours taken away from bad poetry and good whiskey.

"Then, what?" she asked. "It's that you don't believe me, isn't it?"

Clearly sensing Jen's distress, Trey butted her under the chin, then turned to regard me with slit-eyed accusation.

I felt small, mean, ashamed. Yeah, part of me didn't quite believe her. But another part, a miserable, self-indulgent part, just wanted to be left alone to brood. "*C'mon Kieran, help the kid out,*" an interior voice that I identified as my better half urged me. "*And figuring things out, using your brain, might even haul you out of the Slough of Despond. You're an investigator. So why not investigate?*"

"Okay," I heard myself say, hoping this wouldn't turn out to be one of my more regrettable decisions. "I'll do it. Try to figure things out. Okay."

CHAPTER 2

Bengal cats, I discovered by Googling, have retained much of the appearance of their jungle heritage. Originally bred by crossing the Asian Leopard Cat with a Domestic Shorthair (how that had been managed I couldn't imagine), Bengals were now bred together, leaving the Asian Leopard Cat as only a distant memory in their genetic past. Modern Bengals have rounded ears, large eyes, a long and powerful stride, distinct facial markings, and beautiful spotted bronze coats. Apparently, they also have some of the same behavioral characteristics of their wild forebears: only people who can keep up with this high-energy, athletic breed ought to consider adopting them, Google explained. Hmm. Wild At Heart's Bengals were described by Norma on her website as being sweet-tempered and loving as well as beautiful. Indeed they were lovely.

Another cup of coffee and a much-needed shower had rendered me approximately human and I had even donned real clothes in celebration of my renaissance: a pair of tan cords and a cream wool turtleneck. A quick check in the bathroom mirror both reassured and surprised me that I did not quite look the wreck I

felt as the result of my descent into *desuetude*. I saw a woman with short, wavy dark hair that needed cutting, grey eyes, and a mouth that did not smile often enough. Oh, there were perhaps a few more frown lines between my eyebrows, but who was counting? After all, I was approaching middle age. I'd soon be forty. I snorted. Middle Age . . . that sounded like some dismal British hamlet, just down the road from Girlhood-Under-Bridge and not quite as far as Lesser Dotage.

Forcing my thoughts back to the problem at hand, I asked myself, so who stole the Bengals? Figure that out, get them back, and Jen was off the hook. Unless Norma had been the object of a cruel prank, the solution ought to be a simple matter of *cui bono* -- who stood to benefit from the crime. Then I could nail him or them, and bring the Bengals home. Well, there were a host of questions to be answered first, not the least of which was how the hell anyone could have gotten in without tripping the alarm.

I laced my fingers behind my head and sat back in my chair, realizing that I was becoming intrigued by the Bengals' theft. Which was good. Because I needed a Rubik's Cube of a distraction. I needed something that would keep me from my annual bout of perseveration concerning the case that had driven me from the Crown Counsel's office, a precedent-setting animal law case: Her Majesty The Queen vs Owen Mallory, heard before Justice Patrick O'Rourke, argued by Ms. Kieran Yeats, newly-minted Senior Counsel for The Crown.

Ah, hubris.

I'd never argued an animal law case before – indeed the penalties for crimes against animals were so ludicrously lenient that they didn't merit arguing. But this case was different. Parliament had just enacted a new set of sentencing guidelines for

crimes against animals: a maximum of five years instead of the token six months that had been on the books for decades. At last Parliament had realized how out of step it had become with current societal values. This was to be the pioneering case that affirmed our country's condemnation of those who engaged in animal cruelty.

So what went wrong? Nothing. The investigative work was thorough; my arguments were unassailable; the judge was more than sympathetic.

The crime? Well, it was, in a word, horrendous.

One March several years ago, a man named Owen Mallory moved in with his girlfriend Gianna Brock and her three Pugs -- Ziggy, Pasha and Mr. T. But in the course of one short month, Pasha was dead, Ziggy was seriously injured, and Gianna was traumatized. The report obtained from Ms. Brock's veterinarian by detective Alexander MacLeish of the Oak Bay Police Department chronicled a litany of horrors perpetrated upon the two Pugs. Between them, they had suffered blunt force trauma, chemical and electrical burns, hemorrhages, a separated retina, a collapsed lung, fourteen rib fractures, perforation of the thoracic cavity . . . and on and on. The unemployed Owen Mallory, having nothing but free time on his hands, must have dedicated himself to this torture, I argued. Justice O'Rourke, appalled, agreed.

Owen Mallory was sentenced to the maximum prison time the newly rewritten law allowed: five years. He was also ordered to repay Gianna Brock \$5,741 in vet bills; \$311 for an autopsy of Pasha; \$1,100 in lost salary for veterinary visits; \$1,550 for moving costs to put herself in "a safe and secure place away from him" as she put it; and \$2,700 in psychotherapy costs. Mallory was ordered to pay in monthly installments of \$350.

Additionally, Justice O'Rourke found the crimes against these animals to be so "chilling", as he wrote in his judgment, and the suffering "so severe and protracted" that he prohibited Owen Mallory from "owning, having custody or control of, or residing on the same premises as an animal or bird for a period of twenty-five years." Lastly, Mallory was placed on three years' probation; ordered to perform 150 hours of community service that did not involve animals; prohibited from contacting or coming within 200 meters of Gianna Brock; undergoing psychiatric treatment for anger management and domestic abuse issues; prohibited from ever owning a weapon; and required to give a DNA sample.

So Justice was served, right?

Wrong.

Within six months following his conviction and incarceration, Mallory hired a new lawyer and mounted an appeal, based on the discovery of "fresh evidence". His new attorney argued that the fresh evidence demonstrated that Pasha's injuries and death were from falls down the stairs due to a medical condition. What the hell? This sure sounded bogus to me. I did not argue for the Crown on Mallory's appeal – appeals cases are argued by different Crown Counsel personnel -- so I never got a chance to examine the evidence. After a short trial, Mallory's sentence was overturned, and he was released for time served – six months. I was infuriated. Why the hell had we bothered? His new attorney also succeeded in slicing almost \$4,000 off his restitution order and dispensing with the community service requirement and the psychiatric treatment. The only small victories left the Crown were the pet prohibition ban, the keep-

away order, the firearm prohibition ban, and the DNA sample. I don't know how much comfort Gianna Brock took from that quartet.

And whereas Gianna, her mother, and I had celebrated the night after Mallory was sentenced, I hadn't had the guts to contact them after the appeal and his release. I imagined they felt that I, as well as the law, had let them down. Why hadn't I called, or emailed, or texted them? I was a coward. I felt guilty and ashamed. I felt like slinking out of town, tail between my legs.

But another feeling came to displace shame, or at least to take up residence with it: betrayal. I got rip-roaring drunk the night of Mallory's release. And I quit the Crown Counsel's office the next day.

You see, I was heartbroken. My beloved, the law, had jilted me. How dare she? Fifteen years of my life had been devoted to her. And for this? To have a case where I could have been a pioneer, could have made a difference, snatched from me through no fault of mine? I brooded. I drank immoderately. I bathed irregularly. I ate seldom and unwisely. I shut off my phone. I was becoming more and more unhinged, and I knew it. Wasn't it Euripides who said: "Those who the gods would destroy, they first make mad?" I was halfway there.

Eventually, though, common sense prevailed. I didn't, as the kids say, just get over it. No, I just put the whole bundle of feelings somewhere to be dealt with later. I got out of bed, showered, dressed, shopped for food, cleaned my house, apologized to my cats, and decided to look for work. But work guided by something inspirational that Justice O'Rourke had written in his judgment. He wrote: "A person who abuses a child always runs the risk that the child will overcome his fear and report his suffering. The

abuser of an animal has no such concern. So long as he commits his abuses beyond the reach of prying eyes, he need not fear that his victim will reveal his crimes.

Tragically, in this case, it was only in death that Pasha found her voice to identify the nature of hers and Ziggy's torment, and the identity of their tormentor."

I read and re-read that paragraph many times during my dark night of the soul. Pasha's voice, alas, had been heard only in death. Therefore, I, as her champion, could only act as speaker for the dead. Somewhere in those late-night hours of too much drinking and too little sleeping, I made a decision. I would work for animals *before* they met a fate like Pasha's. I would no longer serve the law, justice with a capital J. Instead I would serve those whom the new laws were intended to benefit but all too often continued to fail -- animals. I would listen to the Pashas and Ziggys and act for them. I would be both listener and speaker for the living, wherever that decision might take me.

That decision had taken me into the world of animal advocacy, and sometimes into cases involving tremendous animal cruelty and neglect, but I never regretted my decision. At the end of the day, it felt so much better to have intervened on behalf of a living animal than to have argued in court for justice for a dead one. And Norma Carruthers' eleven missing Bengal cats could certainly use my help. Someone needed to advocate for them.

But here I was, poleaxed by depression again. Would the damned Mallory case never loosen its grip on me? My therapist Margaret believed it would, pointing out that it was the unfortunate coincidence of Pasha's death and Mallory's early release from prison that sandbagged me every March. The repetition was certainly getting old.

Feeling grumpy, I got up to pour another cup of coffee, resolving to evict Mallory from my mind and invite the Bengals back in.

Jen had been pretty damned lucky, I thought. If it hadn't been for the earbuds and her music, she might well have heard the thieves at work, come downstairs, and gotten seriously hurt. I didn't doubt for a minute that anyone who had designs on many thousands of dollars worth of exotic cats would have given too much consideration to whacking a kid who appeared in the middle of the crime.

As if thought had conjured her, Jen appeared in the kitchen doorway.

"I had a shower, too," she announced. "I heard you up." She jammed her hands into the pockets of her jeans. "I called Norma in Ottawa."

"How did that go?" I asked. That phone call must have been hard, but she had done the right thing. She hadn't come asking me to be the one to break the bad news to her employer. I was proud of her.

Jen shrugged, looking down at her sneakers. "Okay, I guess. At least she didn't yell. I thought she would. She just sounded . . . horrified. Sad. She said she would come back early. Tomorrow in fact." She raised her eyes to mine. "I told her that you were an animal crimes investigator. That you were on the case. Was that all right?"

I winced. Yup. I was on the case all right. "Sure. What did she say?"

"That you should call her later today. After she had a chance to let all this sink in. I texted her number to your phone. Is it working?" she asked. "I forgot about it being in a bag of rice."

I cleared my throat guiltily. "Erm, yes, it seems to be okay now." In fact it was charging in my office as we spoke.

“Jen, I was thinking . . . let’s go back to Wild At Heart before I take you home. I’d like to look things over. We can stop by McDonald’s for breakfast.”

She brightened a little. Apparently breakfast at the Golden Arches was still a favorite with young people. Ye gods, I knew as much about teenagers as I did about the denizens of the Marianas Trench.

“And I’d better call Mac. He can meet us at Wild At Heart. This needs to be reported to the police.” Jen didn’t look very enthusiastic. “You know that, right?”

“I know, I know,” she said impatiently. “I talked about that with Norma. It’s just that . . . how many people am I going to have to tell this story to? It makes me feel stupid. And awful.”

“Maybe just one more,” I said, trying for the right tone with her. I hoped soothing would work.

“You said I didn’t do anything wrong, but I feel like I did.”

Trey came to stand between us, skewering me with that accusing look again, clearly Jen’s champion. *Feline ingrate*, I thought at him. *Just wait until you want to snuggle in bed tonight.*

“I don’t mind talking to Mac,” Jen said sadly. “He’s a friend. I just mind that he’ll probably think I had something to do with it. After all, he’s a cop. Isn’t it his job to suspect everybody?”

Alexander MacLeish was a detective in the Oak Bay Police Department, having worked his way up through the ranks from constable. No more lurking behind lampposts on Oak Bay Avenue for him, waiting for unwary tourists from Moose Jaw to leave their cars too long in the yellow zones. Mac and I had been friends for many years. Our

promotions came in tandem, his to detective, mine to Senior Counsel. He'd been my investigator. Together we'd shared the satisfaction of seeing his canny investigations and my stellar arguments put away wife-beaters, rapists, and child-molesters. And when we stumbled, we'd shared our disappointment over pitchers of beer at the Oak Bay Marina Snug.

"The police don't always suspect everyone," I told Jen reasonably. "But, c'mon, kiddo. I'll get my phone and we'll take off."

We loaded Jen's bike into the back of my Karmann Ghia and headed for Beach Drive, taking the coast road north. The sea was cobalt today with a few whitecaps frosting the wave-tops, the sky powder blue and cloudless with a scoured-clean look to it. The Karmann Ghia's heater tried bravely to warm our feet, but I zipped my jacket a little higher, familiar with my car's caprice. Ah spring. As the old song says, I hadn't seen a crocus or a rosebud or a robin on the wing. Where were those storied harbingers of hope anyhow?

My phone rang as we were just north of Cordova Bay.

"Yeats," I said.

"So you are alive," my friend Anne said. "I've only called you twelve times in the last little while."

"My phone was disabled," I fibbed. "But see? Persistence paid off. Thirteen is obviously your lucky number."

“Hmm. Want to come to dinner on Saturday and explain your absence from the world? I’m making risotto. Val and Tonia are coming.”

I consulted my empty social calendar and, finding no conflicts, agreed. “You said the magic word.”

“Come about six,” Anne said. “You could bring wine. It will be nice to see you, Kieran. And I’ve invited someone else, too,” she said mysteriously.

“You’re not trying to hook me up again, are you?” I asked in alarm.

“Who says the latest hooking up efforts will be meant for you?” Anne teased.

“”Yeah, touché,” I said. “My solipsism is showing. Sorry. Just so you keep firmly in your mind that I’m temporarily *hors de combat*.”

“Got it,” Anne said. “See you Saturday.”

“You know you’re not supposed to talk on the phone while you’re driving,” Jen said primly.

“Uh huh. Another of my bad habits which you shouldn’t emulate, kiddo,” I told her.

After a moment, she asked: “Kieran, do you think you and Anne will get back together? As . . . you know.”

“Hmm, well,” I equivocated, a little surprised at her question. “Probably not. We’re pretty good friends, though. Why do you ask?”

“I just wondered,” she said.

I doubted that Jen was “just wondering”, so I waited.

“Kieran, when did you know you were gay?”

Aha. Her real question. Anne had just been an entrée into what was really on Jen's mind. Somehow I wasn't too surprised. I possessed pretty good "gaydar" and it had been pinging about Jen for some time now.

"Hmm," I said, wondering just how much to tell her. "When did I know? Well, when I was just about your age. Thirteen. She was a girl in my class at school."

"Yeah? What happened?" Jen asked.

"Well, I fell in love. Like that corny old song says: my heart stood still."

When Jen said nothing, I wondered if I'd said too much. Or too little. What the hell. I stepped into the silence. "Of course things don't always happen like that, though," I hastened to reassure her. "I imagine for everyone it's different."

"Uh huh," she said quietly, lost in thought.

We drove along in silence for a bit longer, then I tiptoed into my question: "Is there someone in your life you'd like to tell me about?" I asked gently.

"Well, maybe," she said, clearly struggling. "I . . . it's hard to explain. Maybe later. Right now, though, I just wanted to know when you knew. And if you thought I was too young to know."

"No, I don't think you're too young." I didn't want to pry, but I wanted to leave the door open. "I'm always here if you want to talk," I said. "I promise to keep my phone and the sink far apart in future."

"Okay. Thanks," she said, nodding. Clearly the subject was closed for the time being.

We drove along in silence and I realized that I hadn't had a chance to talk to Jen, really talk to her, for some time. While I'd been busy brooding, and she'd been busy at

school, time was slipping inexorably away. She'd turned thirteen, an important milestone for a young person. Dammit, I loved this kid. I really had to do better.

Suddenly Jen turned to me and asked: "Do you believe in God, Kieran?"

I figuratively bit my tongue, holding back my true thoughts on the matter, which would begin with: "Hell, no," or "Are you kidding me?" I searched for an answer that I thought a thirteen-year-old would find useful. Maybe the subtext of her question was why God allows bad things to happen. That was a good question, in light of the present circumstances.

"If I had to say, I would say that my belief is a work in process," I tap-danced.

"Okay, but where are you now? In the process, I mean?" she persisted.

Okay, Kieran, cough it up. "Um, well, no, I don't believe in God. Not the God with the long white beard perched on a cloud on the ceiling of Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel, holding his index finger out to Adam."

"Then, what?" she said after a moment.

"Well, I'd have to say I do believe all this," I gestured out at the shoreline and the ocean, "was created. That it didn't happen by chance."

I looked over at Jen to find her regarding me intently. Crap. I hoped I was saying the right things.

"If it didn't happen by chance, and if God didn't do it, then who did?" she asked.

I cleared my throat. "Well, maybe it isn't a who so much as a what."

"You mean a thing? Like an alien?"

I had just opened my mouth to further expound on this theory when, suddenly, right in front of my windshield, about a dozen Canada Geese just *appeared*, gliding

downward at a steep angle. It was as if pieces of the sky had fallen. To my amazement, we did not hit any of them, and I gasped. My windshield all but kissed the last goose's tailfeathers as they swooped down to land near a pond off to our right.

"Omigod!" Jen called out, turning to look as we sped by. "Oh, wow! I thought we were going to, like, drive right into them."

"Me, too," I said, loosening my death grip on the steering wheel. "Want me to go back around so we can see them?"

"Yes!" Jen exclaimed.

I turned my car around on the empty road and drove back to where dozens and dozens of Canada Geese were arranging themselves beside a little pond. "Aren't they beautiful?" she said with the amazed passion of a poet . . . or a teenager. We contemplated the geese in shared silence.

Thinking back to Jen's question about God, I had an idea. An idea produced by the geese.

"Kiddo, about God . . ." I said.

"Yeah?" she said.

"I'm going to text a poem to your phone when I get a minute. It's by a wonderful poet named Mary Oliver, and it's called "Praying". I think you'll like it. She writes about the natural world – deer, geese -- and that flock of geese appearing as they did just now, and your question about God suddenly put me in mind of the poem. In it she says that anything in the natural world can be a doorway."

"A doorway?"

"Yeah. A doorway into thanks."

Huh,” Jen said, clearly thinking this over.

“She says if we are silent, and just wait by the doorway, another voice might speak to us.”

“Wow,” said Jen, evidently moved. “Like maybe God’s voice.”

“Maybe,” I said. “According to Oliver, we don’t have to do anything special. Just pay attention.”

“That’s why you turned the car around, isn’t it?” she asked me. “So we could go back and pay attention. I get it.”

After a few minutes, I glanced over at Jen. She was looking off into the distance, lost in thought. I hoped I had said something useful. I’d text her the poem, and maybe it would pique her interest. Maybe she would Google other poems by Oliver. They were certainly thought-provoking and I didn’t think Jen was too young for such thoughts. We turned into the McDonald’s parking lot. Thank heavens. If the drive had been longer, maybe Jen would have wanted to know how I’d voted. A trifecta of religion, relationships and politics, all before breakfast.

“What do you say, kiddo?” I said. “Breakfast is on me. You can have an Egg McMuffin and *two* orders of hash browns. I’ll have to rein myself in at one, however. My ageing arteries might never recover otherwise.”