

THE
PENDANT

BOOK ONE OF THE *BUT ALWAYS ME* SERIES



A novel by John P. Andrews

Prologue

The Burning Man

Village of Woodmere, southern England
Fall 1105

I was only eight years old, but I will never forget the day I watched the young man standing on the church steps, looking scared. He was a stranger in Woodmere and didn't belong here. They had tied his hands behind his back, and I remember wishing that I could help him. Two broad-shouldered churchmen stood on either side, holding him by the arms. They worked for Father Daniel, the priest of Woodmere.

I stood in front of a throng of villagers gathered in front of the church. They were all afraid and spoke in whispers. I glanced around to see if my friends or family were near. It was market day, and I had arrived in the village with my parents a few hours before. I'd followed my mother to the different sellers' booths while my father drank ale with friends at the Butting Goat tavern. It didn't take long before I escaped to search for my friends, Geoffrey and Erik. Rather than finding them, I followed a crowd of villagers to the church, which seemed as if it might be more interesting than anything my peers could dream up for entertainment.

Fired brick made up the walls of the church and a few windows let in the light. Gray slate covered the roof, so unlike the rest of the structures in the village of Woodmere. Most were timber-framed, with daubed walls and thatched roofs. The church more resembled my family's home. We lived a few miles south along the shore of the lake that sat west of the village. In fact, they named the village after my ancestral home—the vestiges of a centuries-old Roman farm.

Blood oozed from the man's nostrils and small rivulets ran from several large gashes on his cheeks and forehead. Where there was no blood, dark bruises covered his skin. His left eye was sealed shut, and his nose flattened and bent to the side. He doubled over and blood ran from his cut and swollen lips. I was surprised they didn't beat him further for desecrating the church steps.

Father Daniel's churchmen must have given him a beating inside the church. Except, in my child's mind, churches were holy spaces, not places of torture. Perhaps someone else hurt him before they brought him to the church, but the smeared blood on the men's knuckles convinced me otherwise. If they had beaten him, he had to be a criminal. Why else would they use such brutal ways? He must have done something extremely wicked to suffer the wrath of Father Daniel. Having witnessed the priest angry before, I knew better than to provoke him. I had often felt the sting of a willow branch across my back for not listening during Sunday services. I'd seen worse for others. Once, I watched him whip a girl's bare arse for letting a

boy touch her breast through her clothing.

The young man on the steps wavered and fell to his knees. The churchmen hoisted him roughly to his feet and one of them gave him a hard punch in the lower back. I didn't think it helped the young man keep his footing. It never helped me when my father hit me for crying.

A woman spoke to a man next to me. "Look at him, the bastard! To come here... an outsider, no less... and tell such outlandish tales." *Tales?* I remember thinking. My interest intensified. As a child, I liked stories. What had he been telling people? I leaned in closer to the woman, listening eagerly. "He deserved the beating he got, and more. He'll now keep his stories to himself if he knows what's good for him."

The man nodded. "Father Daniel's not done with him yet. He still needs to atone for his sins. His lies surely came from the Devil himself."

She reached out and clutched the man's arm. "Are you sure? May God show mercy."

"It must be the Devil inside him. How else did he know such things?" The woman waited for an explanation. "Don't worry, Father Daniel will burn it out of him."

Her eyes widened, and she drew in a sharp breath. "I don't think I can watch that."

The man pointed, and I followed the extension of his arm with my eyes. "Look."

To the west of the church, past the graveyard, an open area of hard-packed earth spread toward the lake. Nothing grew there, although today, a large pole jutted from the ground. I had never seen it before, and we came to church almost every Sunday. We always passed through the open area and skirted the ring of tall standing stones that rose out of the ground behind the graveyard. Sometimes, after service, we played tag or hide and seek among the standing stones. But never in the graveyard. Father Daniel warned us of the spirits that lived there, and if we disturbed them, they might pull us under the ground. I often wondered why the same spirits wouldn't be among the circle of standing stones. They were there before the Romans came, my parents told me.

The crowd moved. I jumped out of the way when the people in front of me took several steps backward. Father Daniel had stepped through the church's sturdy oak doors. The sight of him made me flinch. His black robes covered a large, round belly, which stuck well out in front, and the drooping jowls of his cheeks bounced as he made his way down the worn stone steps. I often thought being a priest had its advantages at mealtime. Behind him, the two churchmen dragged the bloody young man.

When he reached the bottom of the steps, the young man broke free and ran into the crowd. Except the crowd closed around him and pushed him back. He lost his footing and fell face-first onto the hard-packed brown earth. He rolled onto his side, groaning. Dirt stuck to the drying blood. The larger of the churchmen stepped forward, pulled back his fist, and hit the young man hard on the side of his face. His head struck the ground, and he cried out in pain. They grabbed him under the armpits and dragged him toward the pole as he feebly resisted. The mob of village onlookers pressed tighter, as if they couldn't wait to see what was about to happen. I dodged the feet and large bodies of the adults and stayed close to the front, afraid to miss the action.

Father Daniel marched through the crowd, pushing people out of his way. He knocked many of them on the back and shoulders or about the head with his well-used thick wooden walking stick. Several villagers hit and kicked the young man, while others threw stones, animal excrement, and rotten food.

Father Daniel stopped at the tall pole and looked at the throng. "Tie him tight!"

What did they plan to do to him?

"Father Daniel, please... please don't do this," the young man said.

They pressed the young man's back against the pole. One man held him while the other tied his hands around the pole.

The young man strained against the ropes. "Let me go. I've done nothing wrong! You must believe me, Father. I told you the truth. I'm Samuel."

Father Daniel pointed his stick at him. "Shut your cursed mouth."

The young man scanned the crowd. "Don't any of you remember me? We were once friends and neighbors. I'm Samuel, the blacksmith. I lived here in Woodmere with all of you. We played among the standing stones, in the fields, and swam in the lake when we were kids. You must remember."

He yelled to an old man watching from a short distance. "Joseph! How can you let this happen? Don't

you remember me? We were friends when you were just a kid, a lot younger than me. I introduced you to your wife. What was her name?" He closed his eyes tight for a few seconds as if he were searching for a memory. "Helga. That's her name... Helga. Is she still with you?"

Joseph's face turned red, and he strode toward the young man. "Fuck off, you little turd! You couldn't know me or my wife. Quit your lying."

"But I do. Please believe me. You must remember me, don't you? We grew up together. It's me, Samuel."

The old man rubbed his eyes. "I don't believe you."

"Remember when we were kids and we stole the ale from the Butting Goat and drank it in the woods north of the lake? You were so drunk, you pissed all over yourself."

Joseph's mouth gaped open. "You couldn't know that. You're lying."

"Did you tell your children about stealing the ale? I wish I would have had children, Joseph."

Joseph pulled a knife from his belt and held it toward the young man. "I don't know who you are, but you're not Samuel. He's been dead for over thirty years now."

"Yes, that's true—but I'm not anymore. I came..."

"You're a liar! I'm going to cut your god damn tongue out." Joseph stepped toward the young man, but before he could get close enough to use his knife, Father Daniel struck him hard in the back of the head with his stick. Joseph fell to the ground and two villagers grabbed him and pulled him away before Father Daniel could hit him again.

Father Daniel waved his stick at the crowd. "Stand back! All of you, stay back! You don't understand what is happening here. You don't realize what's inside this man... and what could get inside of you!" He glared at the spectators. "Demons have taken over his soul. The Devil himself might be inside him!"

His words made my stomach tighten and my heart beat so hard, my head pounded.

The crowd seemed to feel it too. Cries of fear came from dozens of throats as everyone, including me, took an involuntary step backward. It was as if someone had infected the young man with plague.

"This man is dangerous, far more dangerous than an army of Norsemen coming to take your land and kill your family. More dangerous than anything you can imagine. The vileness inside him will steal your soul and condemn you to the fiery pits of eternal Hell!"

Father Daniel turned in a slow arc, glaring at the crowd. When he reached me, I looked away, thinking I could hide. He seemed to stare straight at me, as if he knew all my secrets. I squeezed my eyes shut. I didn't want him to know.

"Burn him!"

I opened my eyes. Father Daniel waved his stick at the crowd and spittle flew from his mouth as he yelled, "He must burn. The only way to get the Devil out of him is to immerse him in fire!"

"Burn him!" came calls from the crowd.

Then the young man spoke, and everyone fell silent, mesmerized by what he told them. For several minutes, he called out to the older people in the crowd, using their names like they were old friends. He told them how he knew each of them, recounting stories of when they were young. The whole time, he continued to insist he was the old blacksmith, that they all knew him when they were young. It surprised me that Father Daniel let him speak for so long. He must have been as fascinated as I was listening to the details he told about the Woodmere villagers. How could he know such intimate details? Some of them spat at him, others turned their backs. Several pushed back through the crowd and rushed away as if they were afraid Father Daniel would burn them too.

A man stepped forward holding a flaming torch and handed it to Father Daniel. The spell was broken and the crowd chanted, "Burn him! Burn him!"

The people pressed closer, and the fear on their faces was replaced with rage. Alarm rushed through me at how furious they had become. I'd seen angry mobs before, but nothing like this. Once, I saw villagers hang a man accused of raping a child. Even then, they weren't as savage as they were now.

Several villagers shoved through the crowd and dumped armloads of wood around the young man. A man took a clay pitcher and poured oil over the wood. Father Daniel raised the torch and took a couple of steps forward, then hesitated. He turned. A gasp arose from the throng behind him.

All eyes went to a gap that opened in the ring of onlookers. Through it stepped an elderly gray-haired woman. She appeared to be ancient. Deep lines traversed her face, and she hobbled toward the young man. The mob fell silent. Father Daniel said nothing, even though she passed within a foot of him.

The old woman stopped in front of the young man and stared at him. I jumped as she slapped him hard across the face. It must have hurt, although he didn't seem to notice. He gazed into her eyes, a smile on his bloody lips.

I thought I heard the young man say to her, "I'm sorry, my love. I guess I just couldn't stay away."

She spoke to him in whispers, and he seemed to hang on to every word. I wondered what she was saying. She placed her hands on his cheeks and closed her eyes, resting her forehead against his. Tears streamed down both their faces, and I thought it odd. I knew why he was crying. He didn't want to be burned alive. But I didn't understand why she was crying. Everyone seemed to hate the young man, and the way she struck him, I thought she must hate him too. But that wasn't true. Seeing the tender touch she gave him reminded me of how my parents showed their affection toward each other, and I knew without a doubt that the old woman loved him.

She kissed him and turned away. The crowd separated, leaving her an open corridor through the mass of bodies. No one spoke to her, but everyone watched her leave.

Father Daniel wasted no more time, and even before she disappeared into the crowd, he tossed the torch onto the oil-soaked pile of wood. The torch lay for only a second or two before igniting the oil.

Many of the villagers yelled with delight, but I watched in horror as the blaze hissed. The young man shrank away from the heat and held his breath. The wood crackled and spit. He strained against his bonds, but the ropes held him tight to the pole. The flames were now so high, I could no longer see him. They must have been twice his height, and I shielded my face from the heat. His screams and the smell of his burnt hair and flesh made me retch. My stomach emptied its contents onto the ground at my feet.

I had to get away. Zig-zagging through the crowd, I pushed past the men and women celebrating the young man's death. I broke into a sprint and made it about twenty paces before two hands clamped onto my shoulders, stopping me. I shut my eyes tight with fear. Father Daniel had come to burn me too. I struggled to break free before a kind voice made me stop, and I looked up. My mother squatted before me and my father stood beside her. I hugged her tight.

"There you are, Alexander. What were you doing watching that ghastly demonstration of evil?"

"Don't talk like that here," my father said, putting an arm around her. "Come, it's time to leave."

My mother took my hand and led me away from the burning man. I thanked God that I no longer heard him screaming. For several minutes, we made our way through the few market-goers who hadn't gone to watch the burning. I tried, but I couldn't remove the last images of the young man from my mind. What dreadful crime had he committed to deserve to be burned alive? And why were the old people so afraid when he said he knew them?

We were almost to our wagon when my father said to my mother, "The young man was right about one thing, Emma. The old Woodmere blacksmith's name was Samuel. I remember him."

"He could have heard that name from anyone. It means nothing."

"Maybe, but it makes me wonder. Why did he come to Woodmere and tell those stories, knowing what would happen to him when Father Daniel found out? Doesn't seem too clever to me... unless what he said was true."

"True? You can't be serious, James."

"The woman who slapped him was married to the old blacksmith."

My mother's brow wrinkled. "I didn't know that."

"That's because you didn't grow up Woodmere. I remember her and Samuel from when I was a boy, probably no older than Alexander." He squeezed my shoulder. "They helped me and my mother after my father died at Hastings."

My mother replied in a tone that told my father to stop talking in front of me. "We'll talk later."

When we reached the wagon, I jumped into the bed. My mother followed, sitting down next to me while my father hitched up the horses. She took my hand. "Alexander, what were you going to tell me this morning?"

My heart froze with fear. "Tell you... tell you what?"

She smoothed the hair away from my face. "Don't you remember? Before we left home this morning, you told me you had a bad dream last night. You wouldn't tell me about it then. Do you want to tell me now?"

I took a deep breath and turned away, peering out over the lake. After watching the young man being burned alive because of the stories he told, there was no way I was going to tell her anything about my dreams.

"Nothing, Mother. I didn't dream of anything."