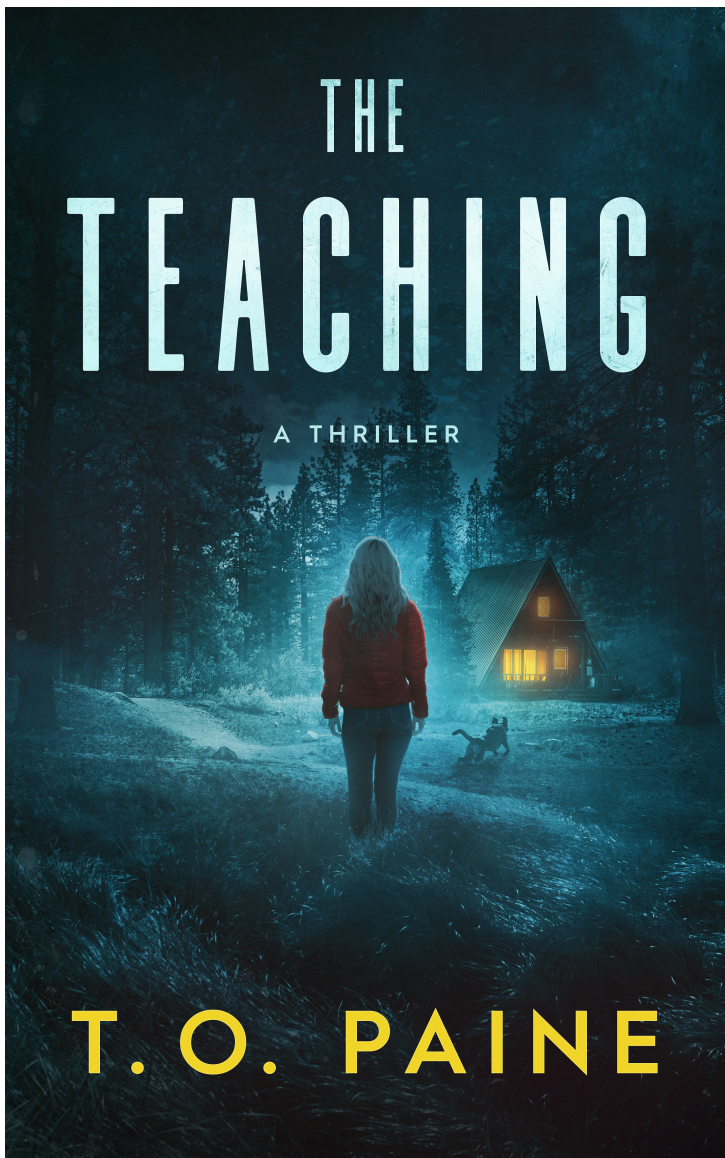


THE TEACHING

A THRILLER



T. O. PAINE

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DARK
SWALLOW
BOOKS

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*For my blood family, my spirit family,
and everyone in between.*

CHAPTER ONE

RAINE

When my dog ran away this morning, it was as if she took my belief in the Teaching and buried it in the woods.

“Java,” I call. “Here, girl.”

Somewhere out here, my dog is running around like an escaped mental patient. There aren't many places to hide in the desert hills of northern Nevada, but she's tricky. Brave bushes grow in shady spots, and Java can make herself small. I'm looking around every rock outcropping, every lodgepole pine, hoping this doesn't take all day. I could yell for her or blow my whistle, but I know better. I could run after her, and I'm in shape enough to run—really, I am—but Java is skittish. It's best to sneak up on her, let her think she found me, then coax her back to my cozy, A-frame cabin in the Haven.

This is how we always do it, Java and me.

But why did she have to run away today? While everyone else in our community starts their Saturday with prayer, I am out here, wasting my time hunting for my dog. Sometimes, I wish I could put her in a straitjacket and be done with it.

Don't get me wrong. I love that black and tan mongrel. If it weren't for her, I'd be all alone.

"Java?"

Dammit, where'd she go?

In the distance, an ATV rips through the forest, engine revving loudly. I hate hunters. The thought of them running over my Java spikes my anxiety.

I stop walking, close my eyes, and take a deep breath. The dry air warms my nose. Spring in these hills isn't green, but it is warm. Most people in our community don't hunt. For a while, when we had close to fifty families, the Pliskins wanted everyone to get hunting licenses so we could save on the community grocery bill, but Terry and Katrice wouldn't have it. Guns destroy the future. The Teaching is about learning from one's past.

"Java? Where are you?"

The trail climbs up toward the firepit, weaving between scattered Junipers and pines before cresting the hill. We used to go up there when we were teenagers—Zack, Shayla, David, Monica, and me . . . sitting around the fire, drinking Red Stripe, or whatever we could steal from the community store.

Now, with my thirties right around the corner, my closest companion is this furry lunatic. I shouldn't blame Java for being crazy. She spent the first year of her life living in the wild after a camper abandoned her. I'm grateful to have become her mom. Everyone I grew up with has married or left the Haven, but I know God will send my soul mate to me. Yet, it's hard. The men in town don't understand our way of life, and we're down to less than ten families in the Haven.

"Java, come on."

The firepit makes me think of David. I shouldn't, but I

sometimes wonder how things might have been. It's funny how facts don't change feelings, but I guess that's what Sebastian means by being in your mind and not in your heart. The fact is, David married Monica over ten years ago. *She's* his soul mate. His like-vibration in the universe. Sebastian said so. They have two kids and a decent marriage, but David would have been happier with me.

Stop it, Raine. Get out of your mind.

I know better than to do this to myself, but after every breakup, I go through a David phase. Warren broke up with me yesterday. I'm okay with it, though. We only dated for six weeks. He lives in Elko, and like others, he was never going to understand the Teaching.

At least I'll always have my dog. If I can find her.

"Java!" I yell louder.

I stop.

Something made a noise.

I listen.

Ahead, the trail snakes around a granite boulder. The rock juts out of the ground like a giant toe. Silver veins run down from its tip and touch the earth. Something moves on the other side.

I focus.

To catch her, I must go slow, act uninterested, and avoid eye contact.

I grasp my whistle and hold it still so it doesn't rattle. The boulder's surface is cool to the touch. The light brown earth beneath my feet is soft. Powdery. I step lightly before crouching, hiding, planning my next move—

A gunshot shatters the air.

I hit the ground and listen for Java, but there's no sound.

The shot should have scared her, and she should have come running around the boulder, but she didn't. She could be shot. Bleeding.

I listen.

All is quiet, except for her breathing . . . but that's not *her* breathing.

Java doesn't breathe. She pants.

Peering around the boulder, a teenage girl crouches next to a cluster of sagebrush. She shoves something into a large backpack—the kind for hiking, not for school—and her hands shake.

"Hello?" I say.

The girl jumps, putting her hand on her chest. "You scared me." She zips her bag shut.

"I'm sorry. Did you hear that?"

"The gun? Yeah, I heard it." She stands off-kilter.

"Are you okay?" I say.

"I'm fine."

She's not fine. Her face is red, and she keeps looking around as if we're not alone. "You're Samantha, right?"

Her backpack is overstuffed, and she leans away from me as if to run. There's a hardened look in her eyes. Two obsidian orbs glistening beneath a watery sheen. I ease myself around the boulder.

Pensive, she backs away, dragging her bag across the ground. "Yes, I . . . look, I—"

In the distance, Java lets out a stream of ferocious barks. Samantha startles.

"It's okay," I say. "That's my dog."

I scan the sparsely populated forest, searching for Java's black and tan fur between the trees, but the ridge blocks my

view. The gunshot and Java's barking both came from the other side. She never makes a sound without a good reason. Given a choice between fight or flight, Java always takes flight.

Samantha puts her backpack on and grips the straps.

"My name is Raine." I hold out my hand. "We haven't officially met. Will you help me find my dog? Her name is Java."

"I'm sorry, I—" She starts to take off.

I grasp her arm. "Wait. We can help you."

"No. You're one of them." She pulls her arm free. "Please. Leave me alone."

"Someone's shooting a gun out here. It's not safe to go that way."

She breaks into a run.

"It's not safe!"

I chase after her. I don't want to scare her, but I'm not exactly at peace myself. Some idiot hunters are playing at being big men, putting our lives at risk. A stray bullet can kill the same as an intentional one.

My sandal gets caught in the weeds, and I fall. Samantha disappears over the ridge. I'm already out of breath, but I push myself off the ground and run after her. Her backpack was way too big for a casual hike. Maybe she's running away from the Haven. If she is, she has a long way to go. Elko is the nearest town with anything to speak of, and it's over thirty miles away.

At the top of the hill, my lungs revolt. My stomach muscles contract, I bend over, put my hands on my knees. Gasping, I lift my head and search for signs of life. Swatches of pine needles blanket the dry earth between clusters of sage and trees.

Samantha is gone and there's no sign of Java.

The stillness unnerves me.

When I catch my breath, a sterile scent pricks my nose. It's not natural. Was Samantha wearing perfume? In the woods? I sniff. Maybe she was meeting someone for a date, but I doubt it. I sniff again. The smell is masculine. Sophisticated.

It's cologne.

Maybe Samantha and the hunters aren't the only ones out here.

Java barks maniacally like she's cornered. She's somewhere behind me now. I glance at the trees ahead, hoping to see Samantha, but she's long gone. She was too fast. Too young. Even with that backpack on, she outran me up the hill.

Java barks again, and I head toward her. Toward the firepit. Rocks tumble into my sandals as I shimmy down the slope. I wish I'd worn my running shoes. She barks yet again, and I run as fast as my Birkenstocks allow.

I focus on my breath.

I focus on my stride, but my mind wanders.

Screw Warren. The next guy I find, I'm going to lay it out there right from the beginning. *Listen. The Teaching is the only life I've ever known, so love it like I do or leave.*

Maybe I shouldn't lay it out there. Maybe it's the Teaching that's the problem. Or maybe, as Sebastian would say, I'm *in my mind* about men. Playing little girl games instead of following my heart and getting closer to God. Being in one's mind is giving in to one's selfish ego. Listening to one's heart is fulfilling the will of God.

My lungs reach a new level of pain. I need to think about something else as a distraction.

Men. God. Warren. My thoughts swim. This is the opposite of meditating.

Java barks again, and I change course. She's not like me. She hates men. No, that's not true. My angel doesn't *hate* men. She's afraid of them. Someone abused her before God put her in my path. There hasn't been a man yet who doesn't send her running.

Not even David.

I come around a corner and skid to a stop, clenching my toes to keep from losing my Birkenstocks. Java stands there, bristling and baring her teeth. She sees me and skitters behind a tree. There's no one else around. I sink to the ground and roll onto my back. With my eyes closed, I put my hand on my chest and grasp my whistle.

I wait.

A soft breeze blows over my face.

The hesitant pitter-patter of Java's feet is music to me.

The faint smell of that strange cologne mixes with the sagebrush.

I feel Java's tongue slick my forehead, and I grab her by the collar.

She's mine.

When I was growing up, I knew every dusty inch of these woods. I could always orient myself by the position of Ruby Dome. That great bald mountain, looking down on us from the south. I could recognize each pine tree by the pattern in its bark and every trail by the distance between the sagebrush and the trees. Different areas had different smells. I knew where I was with my eyes closed. Now, I don't know if I've lost my senses or my memory, but all the trees and bushes look the same. And the smell of that cologne lingers.

Samantha is nowhere to be seen.

Java and I wander through the hills. Pebbles stick in

between my sandals and my feet, puncturing my soles. The knapweed scrapes my shins. My back begins to ache as more than an hour goes by. I wouldn't worry so much about Samantha, except I think she was living with David and Monica. They'll be upset if she doesn't come back.

We make our way past the firepit, trot onto the main trail, and follow it toward Control Road. In the shadows, there's enough moisture on the ground to show where the ATV bludgeoned God's earth with its knobby tires. Grinding my sandals into the tracks removes the traces of man. It's a little game I like to play, and it helps nature be as God intended. Natural.

At the end of the trail, Monica stands in the middle of the road, her hands cupped around her mouth. "Samantha. Are you out there?"

Monica doesn't see us as we approach from behind. "I saw her."

Monica turns, flashes her smile—the one that says, *hello, my sister*—and rests her hands on her hips. Her bright red leggings clash with her pale blue sweatshirt.

"She was up by the firepit."

"Oh, thank God." She exhales. "I've been looking everywhere. How have you been?"

"I'm—"

"Wait. Are you sure it was her?"

"I think so, why?"

"I'm surprised you'd recognize her. You haven't been around much, Raine. I haven't seen you in forever."

"It hasn't been forever." Six weeks is not forever.

But Monica is not entirely wrong. I haven't been around much. Six weeks ago, I started spending all my time convincing

Warren to be in the Teaching, but Mr. “I’m sorry, I just don’t believe in ghosts” wouldn’t listen. Sebastian is not a ghost. There’s a big difference between a real spirit and a ghost.

“Why’d you stop coming to Trance?” Monica asks. “It’s not good to miss Trance.”

“I know. I’ve been busy. Have they said anything about me?”

She gently grasps my arm and smiles. “I have news. David and I are adopting Samantha.”

“What? You’re kidding.” Holy shit. Monica and David already have two kids of their own, and goddammit . . . she has David. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“If you weren’t such a recluse, you would have known. Sebastian announced it in Trance two weeks ago. Haven’t you seen your mother? Honestly, Raine, you need to spend more time with the women.”

The women. I love them, but I’ve wasted enough of my life sitting in on the older generation’s Sunday brunches, listening to their endless stream of gossip. Debating who is, and who isn’t, *in* the Teaching.

“Are you sure it was Samantha up there?” Monica asks.

“Long, blonde hair. About fifteen years old, right? She was carrying a backpack.”

Monica’s lips tighten.

“Is everything okay?” The fright in Samantha’s eyes comes back to me.

“We had an argument this morning, and she took off. It’s not a big deal. Why?”

“She looked upset, but that could have been because of the gun.”

“Gun?” Monica’s face reddens to match her leggings. “She had a gun?”

“No. We heard a gun go off and it startled us. I think there is a hunter out there riding around on an ATV.”

“Why didn’t she come back with you?”

“I wanted her to, but she ran away.”

“You just left her there? Alone in the woods with guns going off?”

“No. She ran.”

“Raine? Why didn’t you do something?”

“I had to find Java.”

“Your dog? You left Samantha alone in the woods to find your dog?” She huffs.

I want to cover Java’s eyes.

Monica, my good friend and sister in the Teaching, is embarrassing herself again. She’s always been so uptight. “Yes, my dog. I had to find my dog.” With a deep breath, I speak slowly and demonstrate what serenity looks like. “I tried to help Samantha, but she ran away. She’s fine. Look, I’ll bet she walks out of the woods any minute now.”

“She’s not fine,” Monica says. “We were going to adopt her, and now she’s gone.”

I kneel and stroke Java’s fur.

Monica puts one hand on her forehead and rests the other on her hip. Her sweatshirt hangs on her narrow shoulders, flowing down over her pot belly. Child-rearing hasn’t been kind, and neither have the mimosas at *the women’s* Sunday brunches. I know better than to pass body judgments—David loves Monica for who she is, the way the Teaching tells him to—but she’s changed over the years.

He would have been better off with me.

The Teaching

“Hey” She regains my attention, squinting as though she just read my mind. “Can you help me find Samantha?”

“I can’t. I have to—”

A second gunshot pierces the air, echoing over the hills.
Monica ducks.

Java lurches away, breaking my hold on her collar. She escapes down the road, and I bolt after her.

“Wait,” Monica says. “I—”

“Don’t worry,” I shout. “It’s just hunters.”

A Birkenstock flies off at a bump in the road, but Java slows down near my cabin, and I catch her. When I turn to look back, Monica disappears into the forest.

A breeze sweeps dust toward me, and its warmth reminds me spring is here.

Spring.

A time for birth and renewal.

Not a time for hunting.

Hunting season doesn’t open until autumn.