

The Double Move

Sports, Religion, Politics, and Sex...A Deadly Combination

In This Dangerous Game - Prayers Go Unanswered

by

Kurt Bryan

The Double Move

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Comments - The Double Move

“Kurt Bryan is the John LeCarre of football fiction. He brings espionage into the stadium and homicide into the huddle. And he’s still in the first quarter of a promising literary career. With his wild, vivid Bill Walsh-like imagination, Bryan could have the Pope at quarterback in his next novel.”

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Other Books by Kurt Bryan

The Game Breaker

Fate Came Calling

Dedication

For my lovely wife, Dolly, thank you for everything...

Acknowledgment

The Author is forever indebted to the brilliant founding fathers of The Constitution of the United States of America. Together, your collective genius is printed on that sacred document for Americans to embrace, cherish and protect.

Thank you.

Prologue

A few decades ago –
Moscow, Russia

At midnight in the miserably hot attic of my family's rundown home, I cried into my lice-ridden pillow beneath my head, my salty teardrops dampening the filthy lining once again. My sensitive nostrils detected the familiar odor of the soiled mattress and the rancid stench from my unwashed linens.

Desperately, I whispered, "Please God, please don't let Yakov visit me tonight!" I was a strong, ten-year-old, dark-haired boy, but did not understand why my older brother slithered into my bed almost every night. I scrambled for the fleeting answers eluding my confused mind but could find nothing to soothe my deepest fears.

The milky glow of the full moon's reflected light spilled through the shattered window above me, as if a beam from God's lantern was offering me a ray of hope. Stricken with dread, I curled up on the lumpy mattress and counted the slow-moving seconds until the onset of dawn. I heard the telling sound signaling the beginning of my despair, as the creaking hatch of the trapdoor was pushed open by my demented sibling.

My brother's evil voice penetrated my eardrums like hot pins, "Rudy? It's me... Yakov. Are you sleeping, little brother?"

The fifteen-year-old Yakov eased into the attic. His red-hair matted against his head as he crawled into the tiny loft and quietly closed the hatch behind him.

I listened with fright and the sensitive tips of my nerves seemed to blister and pop rapidly. Yakov reached up behind me and tugged on the dangling string of the light bulb.

I heard my warped brother pull on the string a few times but then Yakov realized the mechanism was broken.

Yakov whipped his ugly face towards me and hissed, “Rudy, did you break the light bulb on purpose? That was not a good thing to do, little brother!”

Trembling and sweating I pretended to hear nothing as my right hand searched for the long knife tucked beneath my mattress. Eventually, I gripped the warm leather handle of the knife and slid the steel blade under my head. I could sense Yakov’s impending arrival upon my mattress as the dusty floorboards wobbled in response to Yakov’s shifting weight.

Yakov placed his knees onto the ratty mattress and impatiently tapped the soles of my feet.

Yakov whispered, “Wake up, Rudy. Wake up...”

I squeezed my eyes closed tighter and desperately prayed for the nightmare to end. Yakov edged closer to me, and my terrorized thoughts became a monstrous horror.

Suddenly, my tortured psyche snapped like a dry stick from the unbearable pressure of my dismal life. A hot rage exploded from the last pure thread in my soul and my fractured mind skipped past the realm of normalcy. With startling speed, I twisted around and sat up like an angry corpse rising from the grave.

I screamed at my horrible brother, “No, Yakov! No!”

Under the eerie wash of the moonlight, I saw Yakov’s surprised face pulled tight in an expression of startled disbelief. I plunged the glistening dagger into Yakov’s unguarded neck time and again. I heard and felt Yakov’s flesh splitting apart through the continuous vibrations of the stabbing knife. Warm rivulets of plum-colored blood spewed

from the gaping wounds in Yakov's throat as if he were a human fountain filling up a punch bowl. Liquid sheets of ripe blood showered my quaking hands in tepid affirmation of my deadly deed.

I gawked as Yakov seemed to ponder his doomed fate, but it was futile. Sudden death was beckoning Yakov and there was nothing he could do about it. I watched my brother's dying carcass collapse onto the dirty mattress with a thud. I dropped the knife before skirting out of the way and vomiting in the nasty loft. Terrified and shocked by my unspeakable actions, I groped for my clothes and hastily donned an old pair of pants, a faded blue T-shirt and weathered brown shoes. I scurried over to the trap door, opened the hatch and dropped into the hallway as quietly as I could.

Panting like a wolf on the hunt, I scampered through the front door and never looked back. I sprinted through the poverty-stricken roads of Moscow running for my life. I wished that I could have said goodbye to my inhumanely overworked mother. She was a decent woman and I would always be fond of her. My rampaging thoughts reluctantly turned to my father, but I realized those splintered memories had been shaved away long ago.

Several hours later as the yellowish arc of the sun appeared on the eastern horizon, I stopped my torrid running and forced myself to rest. I sat down in the most secluded alley I could find and tried to avert harm's way.

Minutes elapsed and then I heard another young boy speak to me in an inquisitive tone, "Are you sick or hurt, comrade? Your hands are covered in dried blood."

I looked up and met the confident gaze of a portly boy dressed in black. The fat boy had a knapsack over his right shoulder and appeared to be of the same age as me.

I gazed at the boy's pudgy face and dancing brown eyes, and replied, "Yes. I am sick of my life!"

"Me too," said the boy, "My name is, Kirov Schmeduyak. You can come with me. If you don't mind taking risks?"

I didn't know whom to trust but had a good feeling about Kirov. I stood up and glanced down at my shorter peer.

I rubbed my eyes, and asked, "Where are you going Kirov?"

Kirov smiled at me and quickly answered, "To America, of course. I have an uncle who owns a business over there. Once we get there...we can work for him. Promise."

Warily, I asked, "What does he do?"

Kirov shrugged and turned up the palms of his chunky hands, "A little bit of everything...but I don't care." Kirov stuck out his right hand and boldly asked, "What's your name?"

I shook hands with Kirov and introduced myself.

Seeming pleased by our newfound friendship, Kirov said, "Follow me, Rudy, and stay close."

Kirov and I galloped through the awakening streets of Moscow and worked our way towards the outskirts of the city. I rarely looked away from Kirov but did notice the familiar golden spires and steeply pitched roofs of my soon-to-be-forgotten homeland.

Just before six o'clock in the morning, we were crouched beside a big wheat truck, hiding behind it like a duo of secret agents. I watched Kirov creep around the side of the truck like a cautious cat and sneak back to the rear flank of the vehicle. Warily, I trailed him like a shadow, and we slipped over the tailgate of the massive truck. We

ferreted underneath heaping mounds of grain and pointy flakes of wheat poked at my tender face and hands.

“This stuff hurts!” I exclaimed.

“Sshhh!” Kirov replied from underneath his own pile of wheat.

Each of us dug a tunnel up to the midway point of the flatbed until we were exhausted from the effort. I cleared out some room to breathe and rested my beleaguered head on the wooden surface of the truck bed.

I licked my lips and then the driver of the truck started the engine. The rumbling ten-wheeler swayed back and forth and began moving down the empty road.

I asked a question towards Kirov’s camouflaged face, “Where are we going?”

From behind a stack of wheat, I heard Kirov reply, “North, to Saint Petersburg. Then we’re going to switch to another form of transportation. Trust me and be still.”

“Okay,” I replied, and we fell silent.

I was famished. By noontime, I had devoured several handfuls of bug-infested wheat. It was unbearably hot cloaked by the suffocating mounds of grain, and I caught myself hallucinating about guzzling big jars of cold milk.

The truck made two quick stops and we narrowly avoided detection when the clueless truck driver used a long pitchfork to unload kilos of surplus in a robotic fashion. When the truck finally arrived at its destination that evening, we slipped away from the truck and headed for the shipping docks near the Gulf of Finland.

I had never actually seen an ocean, nor the sea. Exhilarated, I washed my crusty hands in the water. I was intrigued by the salty taste of the gulf and fickle motions of the tide.

Rough, mean-looking men were scattered along the piers, smoking, laughing and trading stories of sexual bravado into the darkness. The trusty Kirov led the way and I followed him, my trust and belief in my new friend growing rapidly.

We stopped moving near a short piling. Kirov leaned nearer to me and huskily asked, “Rudy, do you have any money?”

I was embarrassed, and my cheeks flushed. I shook my head one time, and replied, “None.”

Kirov retorted, “Don’t worry, I have stolen plenty of it.” Kirov then asked, “Rudy, do you know how to swim?”

I gave him a perplexed gaze, pointed at the frigid waters of the sea and said, “Yes. If I must, but I can’t swim to America from here.”

Kirov nodded, and ordered, “Stick with me but don’t say anything. Not a word.” Led by Kirov, bravely, we questioned three different sailors until eventually finding the person Kirov was supposed to rendezvous with. Kirov’s contact was a reed-thin man, with nappy black hair and not enough teeth in his scurvy mouth. Worst of all, I distinctly noticed that the oily man reeked of rotting fish.

The loathsome sailor looked down at our courageous young faces. He sneered at Kirov with a few busted teeth, and stated, “Your Uncle Yuri said nothing to me about stashing away two kids on this trip. It was supposed to be just you...fat boy.”

I clenched Kirov’s hand and reasoned that the wily Kirov had learned the value of having enough money and a quick wit. I watched Kirov withdraw a wad of cash from of his knapsack and offer it to the sickly-looking man.

Kirov stated, “You’ll get half now, and a half when we make it to America.”

The grotesque man snatched up the money and spat, “I could kill both of you, and be better off for it!”

The grimy sailor challenged our youthful appearance with a fierce glare. I felt a lightning bolt of panic dash through my body. Momentarily unafraid, I stepped to the side of Kirov and strongly responded, “If you kill us, then God will punish your soul forever!” The astonished man was speechless. He glowered at me with a menacing scowl. I felt my knees begin to weaken and buckle. The sailor pivoted and motioned for us to follow him onto the gigantic fishing vessel. After a few minutes, we reached the submerged decaying gallows of the ship. The man gave each of us a glass of water and guided us to a sealed entry hatch.

Hastily, the seaman opened the oval metal door, and I looked at a very disheartening site. Mixed together with tons of odorous fish were at least 150 boys and girls. The ragged children looked timid, tired and hungry. Kirov stepped through the door like a king, but I paused for a moment and reconsidered all my options. The sailor was in a hurry. He shoved me in the back and sent me tumbling into my new life. I fell onto my stomach and noticed that none of the children laughed at me. Most of the other children were huddled together in small groups in the bowels of the barge, crying into the foul air and calling aloud wishing to be someplace else.

Hours later, as the smelly fishing boat drifted on the open water and my fellow stowaways tried to find a dry place to rest, I turned to Kirov, and asked, “Where are we, Kirov? Where are we?”

Kirov reached into his satchel. He pulled out a tattered piece of paper and a box of matches. He lit a match and showed me his map, “I’m not sure, Rudy. We’re supposed to

cruise by the southern tip of Sweden and enter the Baltic Sea. After that, we're going between Denmark and Norway, then floating by England tomorrow afternoon."

Time passed, and I fell in and out of consciousness. Somewhat delirious, I noticed that my mind was playing tricks on me. On a few occasions I thought that the ghost of my dead brother, Yakov was hovering behind me.

Famished, Kirov and I cooked tidbits of fish with a bundle of flaming matches and desperately consumed our meals. I sucked every ounce of salt from the elastic skin of the fish before swallowing it and scraping for more.

Many hours later the big ship stopped its voyage through the uneven seas and the hatch door was yanked open from the other side. The grimy sailor bellowed into the cavernous hull and his voice echoed several times after yelling, "You have less than five minutes to get up on deck!"

Stampeding like a nervous herd of cattle the fatigued children and I pushed our way forward. I held onto Kirov's hand and prayed to God for help. A few minutes later we were standing on the vast deck of the ship and wallowing in the intense sunshine.

After my eyes had adjusted to the startling beautiful sunlight, I realized that I'd never seen such beauty. I turned to my left and asked, "Kirov, what are those things over there?"

Kirov placed his right index finger to his lips and whispered, "The Azores. They're islands, and we're in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean. Stay quiet, please."

I looked around and noticed a humungous cargo ship steaming towards us and less than a kilometer away. I glanced down at the water and saw two small motorboats skipping across the ocean in our direction. But then, one by one, the growling sailor

approached each child standing in line. Carefully, the distrusting sailor checked the pockets of his small passengers and extracted the amount of money due to him.

When the sailor arrived at a shaking little girl, he pointed at her young face and inquired, “Where is the rest of my money, Tanya?”

The frightened girl shook her head and glanced at her older brother. The sailor shifted his gaze and instantly understood he had been duped. He grabbed the girl by her blonde mane and ferociously jerked her into the air. The angry man stomped over to the ship’s railing and tossed the screaming girl overboard like a bag of trash. Tanya shrieked like a peacock as she tumbled towards the ocean. The unfeeling sailor went back to the little boy and violently picked him up using both of his gnarled hands. Seconds later, he sent the repenting lad to the same fate as his younger sister.

“Liars!” the man shouted, before resuming his collection duties without remorse.

Almost an hour later, all of us children were stowed away deep in the grimy hull of the cargo ship and chugging towards America. Spooky moaning wails of lost hope and delirious cries of madness reverberated throughout the dark cold storage basin and drilled into my eardrums. I attempted to keep a grip on the diminishing foundation of my sanity by pounding my forehead with the palms of my hands, hoping it would help.

Two days dragged by like a limping beggar and the only thing I ate or drank was the stale bread and putrid water given to us by the ship’s crew. I was feeling ill. I defecated in a corner of the ship’s hull and noticed blood in my excrement. Fitfully I rested in the shroud of darkness until a clamoring bell pulled me from my slumber. Again, but in a more frenzied pace than before, the children were routed onto the main deck of the cargo

ship. It was black and cool outside, but I could see the brilliant stars twinkling overhead like polished diamonds.

Five ruthless men who smacked us around steered the weakened passengers to the port side of the ship and the tallest man bellowed at us, “America is three miles away. Be swift, and good luck.”

The crew began nudging the children towards the ledge of the big vessel. Most of the kids started screaming hysterically. Fed up and under extreme time constraints, the crewmen began pushing the flailing children overboard into the Atlantic Ocean.

I heard one of the men shout the only thing that really mattered, “Swim! Swim!” In less than a minute, I was bobbing in the chilly water, and every child had been thrown into the ocean. Slowly, the ship moved away in the opposite direction of America.

I thrashed in the cool water and called out for my friend, “Kirov! Kirov! Where are you?”

Kirov responded to my plea, “Here I am, Rudy. It’s okay! Stay with me! I know it’s cold, but we’ll make it if we stay together. Promise.”

The ocean swells knocked us about like large pieces of driftwood. We linked hands, floated for a while and swam for our lives. All around me, treading pods of worried children begged for mercy. As time went by I heard fewer and fewer pleas from my drowning comrades, as they fell silent and perished from the weakest to the strongest. Waterlogged and totally spent, Kirov and I, and a dozen other children finally touched our feet upon the underlying sand of the beachfront. Heaving to catch my breath, I trudged through the lapping surf. I fell onto my knees and staggered onto dry land.

Unable to utter more than a few words at a time, I looked around and huffed, “Kirov...did we make it to...America?”

The exhausted Kirov stuck his fat fingers into the sand and exclaimed, “Yes, Rudy! And, I think we’re in New York.”

“Thank, God!” I replied, and my wet head fell onto the cool sand of the beach.

Chapter 1

The Present –

On the second Wednesday of May at four-thirty in the afternoon, unemployed football coach Kenway Alan Brown strode onto the passenger arrival concourse at O'Hare International Airport in Chicago. He looked for the ride scheduled to transport him to his job interview with the worldly renowned and eccentric Billionaire, Percy McMillan. The turbulent flight from Oakland, California had been the worst air travel he'd ever experienced, and he desperately hoped it was not a telling sign of things to come.

Still perspiring from the awful journey Kenny glanced at his armpits and noticed sweat stains on his shirt. He cursed and placed his cordovan briefcase on the walkway as hordes of pedestrians maneuvered around him. He straightened up, adjusted his necktie and smoothed the lapels of his suit jacket. He listened to the honking horns of impatient taxi cab drivers and quick whistles from traffic cops urging drivers along.

Disappointed by his appearance, sarcastically Kenny mumbled, "You're off to a great start. Keep it up, man, and you'll be flipping burgers next week instead of coaching college football."

He spotted a male chauffeur holding a white placard with his name on it. He introduced himself to the driver and slipped into the backseat of a polished black limousine. The chauffeur drove the limo eastward and they coasted along Highway 55 en route to Chicago. Kenny relaxed in the lengthy car and allowed himself a moment of

appreciation. He toyed with his shirt cuffs and glanced at his reflection in the tinted glass window between himself and the chauffeur.

The chauffeur cracked the tinted window, tilted his head at him and politely asked, “Pardon me, Mister Brown. But has anybody ever told you that you look like a young Bruce Willis in that movie, Die Hard? Except you have more hair and a larger nose.”

Kenny smiled and replied, “Yes, a few times...” and the window eased partly up.

The vehicle moved north on South State Street and he got his first look at the city named on behalf of the Algonquian literary slogan, “Place of the Wild Onion.” The limo turned right on McCormick Place and they were less than a mile away from Percy McMillan’s place of business. The dividing window slid all the way back down again.

Paul obviously wanted to chat with him, and he said, “Is it okay if I call you Kenny, instead of Mister Brown, or Coach Brown?”

“Sure,” Kenny replied.

Paul winked at him in the rearview mirror and stated, “Several of us on Mr. McMillan’s private staff have a little wager going on about whom the next football coach will be. Thought you’d like to know...I’ve got fifty bucks on you, Kenny, because I like your style.”

Kenny laughed, and Paul elaborated, “Seems like a shit load of people got the wrong impression about you and your brother a couple of years ago when the shit hit the fan, and you took a stand against that whacko doctor, and famous sports agent, Charles Canter. But man...did you come out smelling like a rose on that one, boy, oh, boy.”

“Thanks, Paul. I really appreciate it.” Kenny replied, and then he sat back and said, “I never expected my brother and me to be trapped in that type of situation, but luckily we were vindicated.”

Paul shook his head in tandem with him and asked, “If you don’t mind me asking, Kenny, have you won your battle against cancer yet?”

He sighed and answered, “It’s all right and I don’t mind the question. Umm...it’s in remission and I hope it’s for good. We’ll see?”

Paul made a quick pass of another limo, smacked his lips and said, “I read the articles about you in Sports Illustrated and People magazine, and I’ve got to tell you, it sounds like your real father was a hell of a guy. Too bad you never got to meet him. He was a Park Ranger, right?”

Solemnly, Kenny nodded and responded, “Yes, thank you. He died before Trevor and I were born.”

Respectfully, Paul countered, “I hope I didn’t overstep my bounds, Kenny, by asking you a bunch of questions? It’s just that I’m rooting for you to get the job...big time and I think your brother is the best quarterback in the pros.”

“Not a problem, thanks, Paul, and I enjoyed the conversation. But, can you please drop me off at the next corner and let me out? I’d like to walk the last quarter of a mile or so to clear my head. I need some fresh air before my interview with Percy McMillan.”

“You got it, buddy.” Paul enthusiastically replied.

“Thank you. I worked up a good sweat during my flight because it sucked, but the cool breeze has invigorated me, and I need to clear my mind.” Kenny explained.

Soon Kenny found himself standing on the corner of South Michigan Avenue. He stood there for a moment and watched busy people skirt by him like he was invisible. He moved down McCormick Place as the early evening sun warmed the back of his head. He could feel the electricity tingling in his body from an unfamiliar situation. Purposefully, he kept his eyesight focused above the six-foot level. Hardly anybody was willing to meet his gaze or cast him a smile in return. He walked briskly, bumping shoulders with scurrying people that whisked by him like they were on their way to pick up a cashier's check for ten million dollars.

His spirit enjoyed the vitality of the moment knowing he had chosen the correct lifestyle. He wasn't the kind of man who could go to work each morning and ride a cramped elevator up a skyscraper for thirty years in a row. He didn't want to retire from a job he despised and spend his golden years playing golf in the humid tropics of Florida. Just before five o'clock, Kenny arrived at the end of the long boulevard. He looked up at the 73-story, South Lakeshore Tower building. He entered and was summoned to walk through a security checkpoint twice. He validated his ID by pressing the palm of his hands against a filmy plastic sheet utilizing digital ink technology. He eventually got the green light and strode across the dark granite floor.

Moments later, Kenny was zooming to the top floor in a nickel-plated elevator that had an amazing view of Lake Michigan. Hundreds of boats were drifting on the water. He marveled at the surreal beauty of the yachts, sailboats and other vessels cruising on the ocean-sized lake.

He glanced at the Timex clock perched above the elevator doors. When the elevator halted the doors opened. He stepped from the elevator at five o'clock and paused on the onyx-colored rug.

“Impressive,” he mumbled.

Kenny clutched his briefcase and observed the silver-and-black awning above a massive desk armed with six assistants laboring behind it. The sign announced **McMillan Enterprises, Inc.**, and beneath it were the other locations of Percy McMillan's global communications and real estate empire: Amsterdam, Geneva, London, New York, Paris, San Francisco, Singapore, Sidney & Tokyo.

Even though his friend, current McMillan College Athletic Director, John McDough had tried to prepare him for the magnificence of Percy's McMillan's eccentricity, he was once again reminded of the lofty position he was vying for.

A sexy East Indian woman in a forest green pantsuit approached him and asked, “Mr. Brown? It's a pleasure, I'm Tara.”

He shook her hand and introduced himself. She eyeballed him, then smiled warmly and led him through a maze of gray hallways replete with employees still working in their offices. They stopped walking and Tara passed him off to an overweight blonde woman working behind a computer at her desk. With some effort, Summer leaned over her workstation and pressed a silver button on the console. Kenny detected a bit of movement to his left and a set of double-doors swung open noiselessly.

Summer walked ahead of him then stepped aside and said, “Mr. McMillan is expecting you. Please go in, Mr. Brown.”

He moved through the doorway and into the most splendid office he had ever seen. He glanced at a dove-colored wall concealing another enclave. He re-centered his gaze and noticed an array of timeless artifacts near a bank of panoramic windows above the lake.

He then heard a calm, razor-like voice state, “Kenway, it’s a pleasure to finally meet you in the flesh.”

Kenny looked left and watched one of the wealthiest men in the world approaching him, and replied, “I enjoyed the First-Class travel, thank you, Mr. McMillan. But the flight was terrible, so I’m just happy to be here.”

The six-foot-seven-inch-tall, lean and frosty-haired billionaire walked across the dark carpet. Percy shook his hand and Kenny looked up into his pale blue eyes,

With a slight grin, Percy remarked, “You’ve made it through the interviews with the President of my college, Rebecca Jones and our Athletic Director, John McDough, and at least you made it here alive. So please, from now on, call me, Percy, or Boss.”

He agreed and Percy began a tour of the gigantic suite. He heard the excellent rhythm and blues of Robert Cray’s smooth groove seeping from a well-camouflaged stereo system.

Percy pointed at a long wall dedicated to the history of Archery and asked, “Kenway, I understand you have a sharp mind for world history and taught the subject well. Tell me, do you enjoy shooting with a bow and arrow?”

Nervously, Kenny answered, “Yes, but I haven’t put my hands on a bow since I was a Boy Scout.”

Percy chuckled and remarked, “Don’t worry, Kenway. As far as I can tell, archery began 22,000 years ago, in Spain, near an intriguing place called Vallorta Gorge.”

Kenny concurred and they walked by another wall decorated with a flamboyant Indian headdress, fierce-looking hatchets, and splayed animal skins.

Kenny discerned that Percy was a man who relished oratory fencing, and so he offered, “Yes, Percy, the Egyptians were the first clan to utilize the bow and arrow as a primary weapon of war.”

“True,” Percy shot back, “But the Assyrians introduced the world to the recurve bow that we still use today. The recurve bow became popular as different civilizations evolved. That kind of bow is easier to handle from the carriage of a moving chariot or a galloping horse.”

They stopped at the far corner of the room overlooking the lake. Percy sat down in a high-backed chair behind his stunning and darkly varnished wood desk.

Kenny set his briefcase on the floor and said, “I brought my information for you, just in case you wanted to take a look at it again.”

Percy waived a hand and replied, “Your reputation precedes you, Kenway, or you wouldn’t be here. John McDough would die for you. Believe me, nobody gets through those doors without earning it. But thank you.”

Kenny tried to relax in one of the overstuffed Aztec guest chairs across from Percy’s desk, and asked, “Percy, what kind of wood is your desk made of? It’s marvelous. It looks like a large dark-purple jewel.”

He saw the intrigued expression on Percy’s face. The philanthropist was flattered.

Percy inclined his head and replied, “I appreciate your good taste, Kenway. It’s called Purple Heartwood, from the Amazon in Brazil.”

Kenny raised his eyebrows and quietly said, “Must be rare?”

Casually, Percy answered, "It cost \$200,000 for this desk, and it was a bargain."

Kenny edged forward and Percy stated, "Let's move the agenda, Kenway. Shall we? I spoke with Clancy Sheppard this morning. He speaks highly of you. As far as I'm concerned, Clancy's remarks - when coupled with those of McDough and President Jones carry tremendous weight. It's not often that a football coach begets the endorsement of a man who owns a pro football team, especially when you have never been employed by Clancy Sheppard himself."

Be smart and play it cool, Kenny mused. Then he made an honest statement to test Percy's reaction, "True, but I've known the Sheppard family since I was a boy, and my brother Trevor happens to be the quarterback for Clancy's team. I was touched by how vigorously Clancy supported us through that big mess last year."

Percy nodded slowly and seemed to be in agreement.

Kenny attempted to lighten things up and said, "By the way, I spoke with Clancy two days ago and he said nothing but great things about you too."

Percy's eyes widened incredulously but then a hearty laugh came forth. Percy leaned back in his chair and clapped his hands several times, "Bravo, Kenway. Touché."

Kenny exhaled, thankful Percy had a good sense of humor.

Kenny tried to operate from a position of strength and asked, "Percy, with all due respect, what are my odds of landing this job today?"

Percy gazed at him for the longest time.

Finally, Percy said, "Better than you might think, Kenway. However, we still must test the potential of our business relationship. Let's skin the cat together shall we, Kenway?" Percy leaned forward in his chair and continued, "I admire what you did last

year, Kenway. Most people would have scampered away in retreat with the zealous media nipping at their heels.”

“Never crossed my mind.” Kenny said flatly, “My brother needed my help and I did what I thought was right. Fortunately, everything worked out.”

“Fair enough,” Percy replied. Then he asked, “Kenway, you were a good football player but a marvelous baseball player. Why didn’t you become a professional baseball player?”

Kenny rubbed his chin and answered, “Thanks, but college baseball was good enough for me.” He paused, and boldly said, “I love coaching football. It’s who I am, and what I was born to do.”

The billionaire’s eyes narrowed.

Percy sucked in the cheeks of his slim face and then coolly asked, “Kenway, what are you going to do if you don’t get this job?”

The brilliant man’s icy query caught Kenny unprepared. He had been expecting Percy to ask about the first task he would perform as the new head football coach of McMillan College.

Resolutely, Kenny quietly replied, “I will seriously question your judgment about the issue at hand.”

Percy’s long face remained expressionless for an uncomfortable period. Slowly, the billionaire’s façade changed into a sly grinning mask of acceptance. “Hmm. Each person is entitled to stow their own opinion, Kenway.”

Percy asked, “What’s the first thing you’re going to do if you get the job?”

Without hesitating, Kenny answered, “Thank God, many, many times.”

Percy smirked and for the next thirty-minutes they exchanged ideas and reviewed the details of rebuilding the McMillan College football program. Percy stood up and motioned for Kenny to follow. They moved to the distant wall and entered a tall doorway leading to the next room. It was dimly lit, at least seventy-five feet long and twenty feet wide. The floors consisted of polished hardwood and on the opposite wall hung a small arsenal of archery apparatus.

Kenny removed his jacket, tossed it into a corner of the room and quipped, “I apologize for the sweat stains on my shirt, and it’s been a hell of a day so far.”

Percy walked down to the end of the rectangular enclave and his voice echoed back to Kenny, “Earlier this morning, Mike Porter stood right where you are now. He was given the same opportunity as you are about to receive.”

Kenny cursed under his breath and said, “I hate being the second fiddle!”

Percy laughed and manually adjusted the circular target suspended on the padded wall. “You’re going to get two shots at this target, Kenway because everybody deserves a second chance.”

Kenny focused on the circular target Percy was touching. The outer-ring was indigo blue, accompanied by diminishing spheres of orange, red, and the lemon-yellow bull’s eye.

Percy walked back to him and shut the door.

Percy ordered in a commanding voice, “Lights out, please.”

It became pitch-black for an instant but then a fluorescent beacon shone above the target at the distant end of the room. Kenny looked to his left and noticed the feathers and

vanes of the arrows hanging on the walls. They glowed with brilliant hues of blue and green, and the bows were perched on racks beside them.

Percy selected a bow. He shouldered a quiver of carbon-fiber arrows and took his position near the archer's line. He turned his hips and put his right foot in front of the archer's line while keeping his left foot behind it. He withdrew a single arrow, licked at its glowing feathers and loaded it onto the bowstring. He pulled it back into the firing position. The extremely tall, left-handed man looked like a confident, deadly assassin. Just before Percy released his three-fingered grip on the nock of the arrow he asked, "Kenway, do you know why I like to shoot with arrows in the dark?"

Kenny gave it his best shot, "You've got to trust your feelings and it eliminates distractions."

"Exactly!" Percy exclaimed.

Percy let go of the arrow. It whistled through the blackness with its tail-feathers spiraling and leaving an imaginary trail of colors in its wake. The hissing arrow impaled itself in the yellow bull's eye of the target.

Kenny blurted, "Nice shot!"

Percy thanked him and repeated the astounding feat two more times. Percy remounted his bow on the wall and loped down to the target. He extracted all his arrows and returned.

Boldly, Percy said, "Let's see what you can make of this opportunity, Kenway." Even though his eyesight had adjusted to the sparse lighting, Kenny didn't know if he could stick one of those gleaming arrows into the target. He wasn't even sure if he could hit the wall behind it. Kenny rolled up his sleeves and selected a bow. He plucked a duo

of arrows from the quiver and took a few deep breaths to ease his nerves. Beads of perspiration had formed on his brow and he wiped them away.

Kenny straddled the archer's line with his left foot forward and thought. This is one hell of a job interview!

Sweaty and worried, and with his wits fraying by the millisecond, Kenny settled on the bright target and released his first shot. The skinny arrow veered to the right but was true enough. The arrow lodged into the outermost blue ring of the target.

In a non-committal tone, Percy stated, "I'm prepared to offer the new football coach a four-year contract at \$190,000 per year, guaranteed."

Kenny twiddled the sole remaining arrow in his right hand and mused. I'm on the right track! Don't blow it!

Kenny inhaled and bravely replied, "That might not be in the best interests of the new coach. He'll want a chance to work with his initial class of recruits until they graduate. And of course, the redshirt year should be included. Most athletes graduate from college in five years, not four."

"Good point," Percy replied, "How do five years sound?"

Kenny went for broke and rebutted. "Five years would provide the coach with stability."

Kenny sensed Percy's penetrating stare behind him. Trying to be nonchalant, Kenny looked at the target and fired his last shot. The arrow went screaming through the darkness and came to rest in the yellow circle of the target.

"Bull's eye!" Percy exclaimed. "Congratulations, Kenway! Now, we can get down to business and iron-out the details of your contract at dinner tonight!"

“Yes! Yes! Yes!” Kenny bowed his head with relief and pumped his fists. He wanted to cry with joy. Longingly, he wished that his dead father could see him now, and he couldn’t wait to tell Athena and his family the news.

Percy commanded the lights back on.

Kenny turned to Percy and shook his hand vigorously. “Thanks for believing in me. You won’t regret it.”

Percy smiled and said, “You haven’t given me a reason to do otherwise.”

They exited the room and meandered over to the windows above Lake Michigan. They examined the view silently until Percy finally asked, “Kenway, do you have an attorney to review the documents and financial aspects of your hiring?”

Kenny replied, “Michelle Kelly, in Oakland.”

“I know her father. A huge firm, good choice, she’s excellent.” Percy changed the subject, “Kenway, my life is incredibly busy, and I prefer it that way. I will never get married because I don’t want to be tethered to one woman. I enjoy globetrotting. The world intrigues me, and I like to keep my fingers on the pulse of my business.”

Kenny nodded and kept his mouth shut.

Percy continued, “Here’s the deal, Kenway. My Internet technology company is in a tight race against Oracle and VeriSign to set the trend in the radio frequency ID tag market, and to also pioneer website addresses for cell phones. The future is now, Kenway, I can’t afford distractions, or the future will happen without me.”

Percy sneezed two times, wiped his nose and continued, “I prefer meeting with people face to face, even though I routinely use the videophone to handle the mundane aspects of my business. However, if an urgent matter presents itself, please respect the

value of my time and drop what you're doing. I always treat my employees very well and require the attention of my executives. Understood?"

"Yes," Kenny replied, and he asked, "Percy, how often do you come to San Francisco?"

Percy shrugged his shoulders and said, "I enjoy visiting the campus two or three times a year, but to be blunt, my presence isn't necessary. Rebecca Jones does an outstanding job as President of the college and things run smoothly. However, you needn't concern yourself with my calendar, Kenway. If I ever desire a meeting with you about a pressing matter, I will arrange for the time, place and transportation, if need be."

"Okay," Kenny replied.

Side by side, they continued staring into the vastness of the great lakes region, and Percy said, "Don't worry about the media, Kenway. In the beginning, you'll be a somewhat saintly figure until you lose your first football game as a collegiate head coach. Soon after that, you'll become the wrong man for the job and the call to stick your head on a pike shall begin."

Ruefully, Kenny replied, "Been there..."

"Excellent," Percy replied, "Always tell me the truth, Kenway, but I will never ask you to compromise your integrity. If you're honest, your job will be relatively safe; depending upon the subject we're dealing with. Are we on the same page, Kenway?"

"Yes," Kenny answered, "Exactly."

Chapter 2

On the last Sunday morning of the spring semester at McMillan College in Orinda, California of the San Francisco Bay area, a large congregation had gathered in the amazing church on the eastern part of the campus.

More than 600 hundred people were packed into the hardwood pews of the ornate and stone-built house of God, a similar but miniaturized version of England's Westminster Abbey. Ten feet above the ground, the gothic cathedral had a ring of shadowy portals containing hand-carved statuettes encircling its girth. Each statue depicted a religious figurine housed in a tiny granite cave, including an impressive image of Jesus overlooking the massive wooden entry doors.

In the privacy of my own solemn Priest's chambers, I prepped myself for the final religious ceremony of the springtime. It was almost nine o'clock in the morning and I was due at the main lectern in a few minutes.

I smoothed out a snake-like wrinkle on my deep purple robe and draped a golden silk scarf around my sturdy neck. The soft tails of the garment fell along each side of my chest like a pair of angelic hands.

I walked over to my large desk and picked up my trusty Bible. I strode across the red-carpeted room, halted and investigated the mirror behind my office door. I felt decent but my ragged image revealed the truth about my emotional state. My amber-colored eyes were bloodshot and small crevices had formed at the fleshy corners of my eyes. My

black hair was thick and wavy, but a hint of gray had recently appeared, which invited some depression to visit my ego. As awful as it had truly been, the era of my youth was leaving me forever, and my sense of loneliness was increasing daily.

I caught myself daydreaming and whispered, “Dear Lord, oh thy beloved Creator. I appreciate your divine intervention on behalf of my friend Kirov’s wonderful daughter, Greta. Thank you for answering my prayers and saving Greta’s life.” I inhaled deeply and continued, “If I may be so bold, my dear Lord...I have a personal request to summon your great powers.”

A staccato beat of three rapid knocks penetrated my chambers through my office door, and then a thin voice said, “Father Rudy Quest...we’re ready for you in the church.”

Annoyed, but respectful of my duties, I stepped back and replied, “Thank you, Peter. I’ll be out in a moment. I just need a few minutes with the Lord.”

My obedient understudy shuffled away without debate and I resumed my communications with the Almighty, “Dear Lord, 3,500 years before the birth of Christ, the impatient Jared broke the command of the people and became a rebel.”

I opened my eyes and gazed at the intense painting hanging on the wall behind my desk. The painting’s colorful oils sprang to life detailing the Son of Nazareth. The breathtaking canvas dominated everything in the room with forlorn beauty and eternal strife.

I raised my white-skinned Bible above my head. I gripped the heavy book tightly and passionately stated, “I don’t want to become a rebel, my dear Lord! I have already walked down life’s most treacherous and sinful paths! I hope you can understand my

innermost feelings? Please! Please, hear my urgings and allow the love of my life to join me here in the bay area, now and forever! Thank you, oh my loving Lord. Amen!”

Moments later the burgeoning throng of churchgoers rose to their feet when I entered the broad, bone-colored marble-floored sanctuary. I was calm, as my loyal disciples watched me step onto the stage at the forefront of the holy room. The organ player had been doing an excellent job of filling up the ambiance of the church with glorious music. The organist toned it down when I stepped into view.

I smiled at the familiar faces and acknowledged the collegiate choir poised on a set of tiered bleachers behind my location. The choir’s white gowns shone beneath the sparkling lights of the huge chandeliers. Once again, I hoped that the Lord Almighty would soon answer my prayers.

The buzz of the crowd mellowed, and I scouted the incredible innards of the vaulted-ceiling church. I looked at the gold-plated cross on the left wall and then glanced at the bubbling fountain of holy water near the entrance.

I placed my Bible on the podium and then noticed my longtime friend arriving just in time for my weekly sermon. The rotund and completely bald Kirov dipped his sausage-like fingers into the holy water and traced the sign of the cross over his chest.

I offered a slight grin and watched Kirov hustle through the foyer and find a spot amongst the rows of medieval-era, armor-plated knights standing at attention against the walls of the church. Kirov removed his navy-blue blazer and leaned a shoulder against the wall between the artifacts.

I looked up at the beautiful stained-glass windows filtering the sun’s bright rays. There were six of the handcrafted, thirty-foot-tall slabs of colorful spectra-glass

embedded in the walls, and they glowed with magnificent hues from the spectrum. I stood there, awestruck again by the Lord's power to create unequalled beauty.

I drew in a few breaths and was about to speak but took heart upon noticing Kirov intently staring at me from afar. In a flash my mind did cartwheels, and my thoughts rambled through various images from the past few decades.

After landing on the beach in New York, Kirov and I had gone to work for Kirov's uncle, Vladimir. For seven years we learned how to lie, cheat and steal any kind of goods and grew up on the unpredictable streets of the Big Apple. When each of us had turned eighteen years old, Vladimir sent us to an associate's secret estate in Canada for almost a year. At that secluded compound, we had learned the basics of murder, surveillance and hard money collection tactics. Upon returning to New York, Vladimir put me in charge of securing the cash interest payments from unlucky clients that were too delinquent on their loans. The standard operating procedure never varied, and by the end of my fourth day on the job, I had mastered the harsh system. On the first visit, I would simply clean out the money from the cash registers, and safes. On the second visit, I would break the nose of the borrower. The third visit was the most brutal of all. I would knock out the borrower's top row of teeth with a stainless-steel ball peen hammer, and then flush the nasty broken teeth down the toilet while I held the victim's bloody head still and made them watch. After my first year of doing those horrible deeds, I had found myself looking forward to the fourth and final visit to a client because it meant a merciful death for that poor soul.

The only consolation of our evil work had been the outrageous money Vladimir paid us. By my thirtieth birthday, I had saved almost a quarter of a million dollars, and

just two days after that, Vladimir sent me on a “mission” altering my life forever. For more than a decade, I had suspected that I felt more comfortable in the arms of other men, not women. I had slept with some very pretty women and handsome men, but for me, the choice had been made long ago. During that fateful third visit to the unfortunate owner of a cash strapped beauty salon, I ushered the terrified man upstairs and secured him to a chair with duct tape. While preparing to knock out the salon owner’s top row of teeth with my bloodstained hammer, the petrified owner began to pray with fervent emotion that I had never witnessed before.

Taken aback, I watched the desperate man’s demeanor change before my eyes. The doomed man transformed into a cool and confident person and was seemingly unafraid of the terror awaiting him from the merciless weapon in my hands.

Just before I knocked out the salon owner’s front teeth, the man smiled at me and firmly said, “Jesus loves you, but you have forgotten that.”

I froze upon hearing those words and gazed into the prophetic man’s eyes for several minutes before halfheartedly destroying his teeth with the hammer.

However, three days later, I summoned the courage to meet with Vladimir and said goodbye. With Vladimir’s help, I paid a small fortune to have a new set of identification documents created. I fled New York, traveled the world and tried to shake free of my battered soul before plunging myself into the conflicting life of the priesthood.

Now, my melancholy thoughts rushed me back to the present moment within the church, and I watched the congregation sit down on the padded benches of the varnished pews.

I smiled at the crowd and spoke with bold conviction, “Dear mighty and powerful Lord, thank you for sharing this marvelous day with us! We have many reasons to celebrate your awesome glory!”

I paused and the excited crowd came alive with feedback, “Amen!” and “Hallelujah!” and “Praise Jesus!” reverberated in the building, buffering my pride.

For the next twenty-five minutes, I delivered one of my most stirring and emotionally gripping orations. I paused halfway through the service and allowed the choir to belt out two amazing renditions of rapturous gospel music.

After the service concluded, a long line of people patiently waited for a chance to greet me. Humbly, I welcomed each of them and inquired about their families and loved ones. Knowingly, I glanced at Kirov dutifully biding his time at the end of the line. Several moments later, Kirov and I were the last two people in the church.

I smiled at my longtime comrade and quietly asked, “What can I do for you, my dear friend, Kirov?”

My overwhelmed and obviously grateful criminal friend shook my hand, waggled his baldhead and quietly replied, “You’ve done more than enough already, my dear Father Rudy. And, it will be my honor to repay the favor, if you ever need it.”

Kirov knelt and kissed the substantial emerald mounted on my golden pinky-ring on my left hand.

Kirov looked up at me and said, “Your tender prayers have saved my daughter’s life. Thank you, Father Rudy. Thank you!” With tears in his eyes, Kirov bowed his head and sobbed meekly.

I reached into the right pocket of my robe and testified, “Learn from this tough lesson, Kirov. The Lord is your savior...not me.” I withdrew a tiny cross from my robe and extended my hand towards Kirov.

I opened my hand and held it open until Kirov realized what I was holding.

I urgently whispered, “Take it, Kirov, and keep this symbol of the Lord with you for the rest of your life! Trust your life in the glory of God!”

I watched Kirov examine the small bejeweled crucifix. Kirov lifted the heavy little cross from my hand. Slowly, Kirov twirled the cross, seemingly bewildered by its elegant, T-shaped design and its breathtaking allure. Kirov thanked me profusely and then tucked minuscule cross into the breast pocket of his blazer.

Kirov rose up and pivoted. He walked down the center aisle of the church. Proudly, I watched him stride away as the wooden heels of Kirov’s expensive shoes clicked against the polished marble floor.

A few hours later, as the neon-blue numbers of my BMW’s dashboard clock switched over to noon, I pulled my silver BMW into the garage of my home. I turned off the engine, pressed the remote control for the garage door and stepped out of the vehicle.

I entered my house, and in time was resting in a wicker chair on the balcony enjoying a stunning view of the San Francisco Bay area. I leaned back in the chair and propped my legs onto the matching table. I sipped at a mug of cold beer, my gaze drifting over the panorama from my Hiller Highlands estate. I peered at the distant San Francisco skyline across the bay, glanced at The Rock and settled upon the Golden Gate Bridge far

away. I noticed a strand of curling white clouds overhead, but they were harmless, and the threat of rain was nonexistent.

I mused I am a lonely man, and I want my lover to join me.

I chugged on the beer and sifted through a pile of mail. I picked up a small green envelope and my heart skipped a beat. I recognized my lover's crisp handwriting on the envelope. I ripped it open and eagerly read it several times.

Rudy,

I'll be moving up there soon. Be patient and our dreams will come true!

Forever,

Your Love

My heart did some emotional calisthenics, and I felt as if I could fly around the world like Superman. True love was finally going to enter my life! I stood up on the banister of the balcony and beamed at the sky.

Overjoyed and with bullets of glee zinging through my body, I exclaimed, "Thank you, dear Lord! Thank you for answering my prayers!"

Chapter 3

Friday morning under a pinkish sunrise Kenny woke up in the master bedroom of his home in Walnut Creek, California, and he rustled Athena. He hadn't slept much in two days but felt like he could run a marathon. A temporary sense of relief warmed his soul because the results from his latest blood test had come back clean. Life seemed to be giving him a few breaks and he wanted to celebrate with Athena.

"Good morning, Athena," Kenny whispered, and he nibbled at her neck. Athena's long auburn hair erotically tickled his skin. Her sweet womanly scent flooded his nostrils and quickened his arousal. "You're the sexiest girlfriend any man could have."

Athena rolled over and danced her fingertips down his body. She asked, "How does it feel to be employed again, Kenny?"

"Good, but not as great as you feel right now," Kenny replied.

Athena kissed him hungrily and reached between his legs. She teased him with gentle strokes and skipped her fingernails across his manhood. Passionately, they caressed each other as if they would never be together again. Rosy with lust, Athena stood up on the bed and twirled to display her incredible bronzed body. She straddled him between her legs in the process. Athena braced her hands against the wooden beams of his ceiling and grinned seductively down at him.

Athena cooed with lust, "Kenny, your eyes are so green, you look incredibly handsome now! And, keep your hair that way, I like it with a little bit of length in it."

He chuckled and replied, "I'm sure I look much better now that I have a job."

Kenny felt the curve of her firm legs and taut ass. Athena moaned with pleasure. Thrilled and with his skin covered in goosebumps, he sat up and pulled Athena onto her back, and she bounced on the bed. In a push-up position, Kenny hovered over her until she was steaming with desire. They began making love with animalistic intensity and gave it everything they had for almost an hour.

After showering, they sipped at their mugs of coffee on the second-level deck jutting from his bedroom. Kenny looked at his big backyard while his reliable Golden Retriever Touchdown roamed amongst the oaks and tall pines.

He gazed at Athena, and she looked snug in her fluffy white robe. Her long hair was combed back like the thick mane of a pony. She asked him, “Are you ready for your first day on the job?”

He finished drinking his coffee and replied, “I can’t wait.”

Athena leaned over to him and said, “I could tell, Kenny... you were an absolute beast in bed this morning! And, I’m so proud of you, Kenny. I’m really looking forward to your press conference this morning.”

“Thank you, babe,” he replied. He thought for a moment and continued, “Athena, no matter what happens with this new job, I appreciate everything you’ve done for me. A lesser woman would have walked away from me a long time ago. I love you, and you’re the best.”

“So are you, Kenny. That’s why I’m still here. I love you, too.”

After getting dressed, eating breakfast and playing fetch with Touchdown in the backyard, Kenny got into his truck and headed west on Highway 24 towards the McMillan College campus in Orinda. Minutes before eight, Kenny parked his SUV in the

faculty lot adjacent to Bunker Hill Stadium. He peered at the 35,000-seat arena and envisioned leading his football team onto the playing field. He still had a long way to go before that moment would come to fruition.

Kenny strode across a damp lawn of the only perfectly circular campus in the NCAA and saw an army of blackbirds tugging fat worms from the wet grass. Many of the 21,500 college students were hustling to class. He looked at the impressive brick and white-column structure of the Washington Administration Building. The meandering Jake McMillan River cut its path through the center of campus. He spotted a couple of footbridges arcing over the river and strode across a corner of the soccer field.

Kenny made his way into the new athletic facility. On level one were a modern 10,000 square-foot weight room, three training annexes, two film rooms, and two physical therapy offices. Level Two housed the athletic coaches' offices and staff meeting rooms. Located on Level Three were four separate offices, including Athletic Director - John McDough's sprawling office. Level Four contained a section of eight luxury suites overlooking the stadium, designed to hold the VIP guests of Percy McMillan and cash-wielding alumni.

Kenny entered the whitewashed hallway of the facility at eight o'clock. He admired the patriotic décor, went up to the third level and was eagerly welcomed by his friend and immediate boss, John McDough.

McDough clad a dark blue suit, white shirt, and a red necktie. His blue eyes never stopped dancing, but his very stocky build seemed to be trapped inside of his clothes, like the meat of a sausage stretching the limits of its casing.

Kenny smiled and offered, “Happy Birthday, John. How does it feel to be forty-eight?”

McDough executed the habitual snapping of his fingers and quickly replied, “Halfway to ninety-six! Thanks, Kenny.”

He followed McDough downstairs to the second floor. McDough handed him the keys to his new office. “Congratulations, Kenny. And, I like your suit. Nice touch with the stone-colored jacket and salmon necktie. I’m a stickler about my coaches looking sharp at all times.”

Kenny scouted the fissures on McDough’s brawny face and thanked him with a nod. He inserted the key and opened his office door. He looked at the navy-blue carpet and his office smelled of fresh paint. He savored it. An L-shaped oak desk with a computer, two guest chairs, and a hefty swivel chair were in place.

McDough excused himself to take care of something and for a few minutes, Kenny was alone in his new office. He retracted the blinds and examined the view of the campus. It was peaceful and he relished the tranquility, understanding that a storm of activity would soon begin for him.

McDough returned in a flurry, snapped his fingers and blurted, “Press conference in thirty minutes. We should be done by ten-thirty. After enduring that dog and pony show, we can sort through a massive box of the faxed resumes you’ve already received. They’re in my office. Let’s see if we can find you a few more quality assistants’ coaches. Do you have most of your staff lined up yet?”

Kenny rubbed his hands together and replied, “Nothing has changed since I went to Chicago. Lou Macaw is onboard and so is Brody Dunn. Eddie Banks, Craig Jackson,

and Paul Jorgensson have accepted, and obviously, Jeff McMillan is a lock because his Uncle Percy signs my paycheck.”

McDough raised his eyebrows and asked, “How do you feel about having Percy’s nephew on your staff?”

Kenny rubbed at his face and then replied, “I’m not an idiot. Sometimes one must give, in order to get. Anyway, we’re all robbing the same train. Let’s just win some football games and hope for the best.”

McDough smirked and cracked, “Hopefully that will take care of it.”

Sarcastically, Kenny replied, “I hope to last longer than Ghizanapo did.”

With a confused look, McDough asked, “Who in the hell was Ghizanapo?”

Kenny chuckled and answered, “Ghizanapo did not coach football. He was a progressive tribal leader in Argentina around 1,000 BC. Ghizanapo made the mistake of getting down to business before his wary clan had warmed up to his futuristic way of thinking. On his inaugural morning as Chief, Ghizanapo enacted some controversial decisions.” Kenny caught his breath and went on, “After Ghizanapo issued his first set of rulings the bitter tribe revolted that morning. Ghizanapo’s angry tribe rallied for his demise. They chopped off his head and butchered him into pieces before feeding his remains to the starving mongrels of the village. To the best of my knowledge, Ghizanapo’s brief reign is the shortest stint of power ever known, less than an hour total.”

McDough laughed, snapped his fingers as he always did when he was nervous or excited, and departed to handle a few things before the press conference.

At nine o'clock that morning, Kenny found himself standing backstage at Election Arena and preparing for his press conference. He'd been chatting with some peers and had been introduced to the most popular person on campus, a priest, Father Rudy Quest.

The charismatic and colorfully robed theologian intrigued him, and he asked the priest another question, "Father Rudy, when you were growing up in New York, did you ever play football?"

Father Rudy furrowed his brow, and replied, "Soccer yes, but football was never my game. I hope my answer doesn't disappoint you, Kenway?"

"Not at all, just curious," Kenny replied.

He was about to ask the priest another question, but Father Rudy beat him to the punch, "What individuals do you admire, Kenway?"

The priest's question surprised him. But Kenny replied, "My parents."

He saw the priest's face register approval with the twitch of his brow, and then he was suddenly called onstage for the press conference.

"Nice talking with you, Father Rudy," Kenny said while being whisked away.

"Likewise."

Kenny walked onstage to a smattering of applause from supporters, but the impassive reaction from the journalists in the pit belied the flashbulbs and floodlights hitting him in the face. Kenny sat behind a long table with faculty on either side, McDough was to his right and the President of the college and Rebecca Jones sat to his left. Kenny had met Rebecca twice before, but he glanced at her short brown hair and said hello. She was a highly respected administrator that cared deeply for her beloved

campus, its faculty, the alumni, and the students. Father Rudy sat down in a chair beside her.

Kenny's family were standing behind the media near the far wall; his mother, stepfather, Gregory Cage, Trevor, Marla, and Athena, along with his aunts, uncles, and cousins. Kenny nodded at them and sipped at a tall glass of water.

The photographers snapped pictures and President Jones leaned into the microphone and gave a nice speech about rejuvenating the football program.

She spoke for a few minutes, then paused, and said, "In closing, I would like to thank all of you for coming. This is a great day for McMillan College and long overdue. After a lengthy twenty-eight-year absence, the McMillan College Patriots will take to the gridiron once again! Ladies and gentlemen, it's my pleasure to introduce our new Head Football Coach, Kenway Alan Brown!"

It was a small ovation, but Kenny appreciated it.

Immediately, a pasty-skinned reporter raised his hand and fired the first question of the morning. "Coach Brown, I'm Hank Smith from the Sacramento Bee. I'd like to know if you have any reservations about becoming one of the youngest head football coaches in the NCAA? And do you think Percy McMillan hired you predominantly because you and your fraternal twin brother, Trevor, who happens to be a professional quarterback, have been hot news items due to the nasty dilemma both of you endured last year? Charles Canter was one of the premier sports agents in the country, and Dr. Tracy Moore surgical skills were top-notch."

Deliberately, Kenny paused to ensure the reporter realized who was in charge. Heads turned to Kenny and he finally replied, "I don't have any reservations about taking

this job. In fact, I would like to thank everybody associated with McMillan College for this great opportunity, especially Percy McMillan. I also owe a debt of gratitude to the assistant coaches, players, and administrators from my past. Finally, I would like to thank my family, and Athena, and of course, I'd like to thank God."

Kenny took a drink of water and continued his answer, "In response to the second part of your question, of course, Percy McMillan hired me in part because of the unfortunate notoriety sent my way. Luckily, Trevor and I were vindicated when the truth came out. Obviously, landing this job is frosting on the cake. But I've earned it and I'm ready for the challenge."

A female reporter barked out another query, "Coach Brown...Heidi Mills, from the Oakland Tribune. I'd like to know if you've solidified your coaching staff?"

"Good question, Heidi. I'm in the process of doing that."

Heidi asked him a follow-up question. "Is it true that Percy McMillan forced you to hire his nephew, Jeff McMillan?"

Kenny replied, "No, but he asked me about it, and I said yes. Wouldn't you?"

Laughter ensued, and Kenny took another sip of water.

Another female reporter from the on-campus radio station KMAC got his undivided attention, and asked, "Coach Brown, will your job be on the line if you don't win enough football games next season?"

Kenny cracked a smile and replied, "In this business, your job is on the line every single day."

An extremely thin, ghastly looking man stood up and said, “I’m Bob Clinton, from the Religious Voice magazine. If you don’t mind, I’d like to ask Father Rudy a question. If that’s okay?”

Everybody held silent and looked to the priest.

Kenny looked on, and Father Rudy gestured for the man to continue.

The reporter said, “Thank you. Father Rudy, according to my sources you are the most highly regarded person on campus. If that’s true, I would like to know how you feel about Percy McMillan’s decision to revive the football program after all these years? Specifically, I would like to know if it would divert any attention away from your preparation for the Pope’s official visit to the bay area? The speculation is rampant but based on your well-documented work with the needy and downtrodden in the Middle East and in Latin America, including those of differing faiths, you seem to have a legitimate shot at becoming a cardinal under this Pope. Rumor has it you are receiving strong consideration from the Vatican to become a cardinal, and the Pope might select you as one of his handpicked cardinals even though you’re not a bishop; like his surprise choice of French Vatican Foreign Minister Jean-Louis Tauran.”

Kenny looked on with interest. Father Rudy cleared his throat and calmly replied, “I’ve been blessed to serve at McMillan College for the past three years. If it’s God’s will for us to have a football team, then so be it and I will support them with the pride of a lion. Regarding the possibility of the Pope choosing me to be a prince of the church, it would be a dream come true for me, but that’s between the Lord and our beloved Pope.”

After Father Rudy finished, a woman from KTVU Channel 2 asked, “Excuse me, Father Rudy. Do you plan on leading a pre-game prayer with the football team before

each home game? If so, will it be mandatory for the entire team to attend? If yes, won't that offend those individuals who don't believe in God or practice different religions?"

Kenny met the gaze of Father Rudy. They hadn't discussed the issue during their initial conversation.

Kenny nodded in affirmation, and Father Rudy answered, "Since I have not had the opportunity to speak with Coach Brown about conducting a team prayer, I will defer your inquiry to him. Coach Brown, what do you think?"

Kenny looked at the journalist and replied, "A team prayer is fine with me. I believe in God. However, I support freedom of religion, and if we do have a team prayer, it will only be for the players that want to be there."

Kenny sat back while the journalists peppered McDough with questions about fundraising and NCAA compliance. He felt relieved that his first scuffle with the press had been relatively harmless. Even though he remained positive under his wary façade, he rubbed his hands together to release his tension. An unflattering image came to his mind, and he understood that some journalists were like a knot of rattlesnakes sunning themselves on the rocks before warming up and fanning out in preparation for a strike.

Chapter 4

On a warm Tuesday afternoon three days before the Fourth of July, Kenny and his assistant coaches were gathered in the conference room as he guided them through the summertime recruiting agenda. Kenny was in a pair of shorts, a white McMillan College Football golf shirt and a pair of leather sandals. He sensed that his coaches were antsy in anticipation of their month-long summer break and he attempted to wrap things up quickly. He stood beside a long white grease board with the names of 200 potential recruits on it and each group was color-coded by their prospective position and their geographic location.

Every member of his coaching staff was seated around the conference table. Each man had his recruiting portfolio opened to the correct page, except for one person, the often disagreeable and red-haired, Curtis Waters. Kenny fiddled with his red pen and mused. Even though he had not fully confronted Curtis about his unorganized work habits, he was almost certain that he'd made a mistake in hiring the irritating man. He didn't know if he should terminate Curtis now or give him one full season to test the man's mettle.

Kenny twirled his pen in his hand and stated, "We're almost done gentlemen. After we finish, you guys are on vacation for the month of July. So, pay attention."

Clockwise, he glanced at his staff. His best friend, the black-skinned Lou Macaw was at the head of the table and his smoothly shaved ebony head glistened beneath the

lights. Lou was as loyal as a hunting dog, smart and reliable. The muscular and Samson-like, Caucasian, almond-haired and blue-eyed Phillip Zanton was beside Lou. Zanton's awesome physique, 10-year career as a pro football player and recognizable face from his shaving cream commercials made him an asset. Zanton was a devout Muslim and often wore a beige skullcap on his head, like that of a yarmulke.

The tall and black Craig Jackson was next, with his perfectly coiffed Afro. Craig's acidic humor and biting wit kept everybody on their toes. The diminutive and chalky-skinned Brody Dunn was to Craig's left. Brody almost always looked for the punch line in every situation. Jeff McMillan rose and stretched his legs. Jeff resembled a younger and shorter version of his uncle Percy. Next to Jeff were the massive biceps and impressive physique of Keith Greene, a longtime Defensive End in the NFL. The blonde Nordic-looking Paul Jorgensson was scribbling a new passing play on a notepad, and the ill-tempered Curtis Waters was nearest to him. Finally, the kind-hearted black southerner from Texas, Eddie Banks was staring at Kenny with his wide ebony eyes.

His assistant coaches quieted down. Kenny pointed to a list of names on the board and asked, "Craig, do these guys in green represent every junior college athlete in southern California we're recruiting?"

Kenny looked back at the table and Craig replied, "Yep, I'm on it."

Kenny made a check mark on the board and moved to his right. He glanced at the names representing the East coast and asked, "Jeff, how are we doing back east?"

Jeff McMillan answered, "Excellent, in fact, we've got a shot at landing two phenomenal players from New Jersey and Florida."

Kenny smirked and said, "Your uncle Percy would be proud. Good job."

Kenny scrutinized another set of names in black ink and bellowed. “Coach Dunn, what’s the story in Nevada, Oregon and...Washington?”

Brody flipped through some pages in his portfolio and replied, “Not bad, but we’ve lost a few studs that decided to walk-on at Reno and Washington.”

Kenny put a check by those names and moved on. He spun around and gazed at the most well-known member of his coaching staff, Phillip Zanton.

Kenny stared into his blue eyes and asked, “Coach Zanton, what’s our situation in Idaho, Montana, and Colorado? Are your loyal fans still asking for your autograph because of those shaving cream commercials that have been playing for years?”

The group chided Zanton and the former pro football star playfully retorted, “Keep it up guys, but I’ve got a lifetime supply of shaving gel and razors. Not to mention a fat royalty check that hits my bank account each month. Don’t worry, I’ll have the last laugh...if Allah wishes it to be that way.”

They continued laughing, including Zanton and Kenny. After the chortling stopped, Kenny motioned for Phillip to continue.

Zanton removed his Muslim skullcap and scratched the top of his head. Then he said, “We’re doing great, Kenny. I’ve got four maybe five legitimate ball players I’m looking at. But most importantly, I think we’re in the lead with the Blum triplets.”

“Glad to hear it,” said Kenny, “If we land the Blum brothers, that’ll be a huge feather in our cap. They’re great athletes and we need them...bad. However, if we do sign them, we’ll have to watch 'em like hawks because they’re only sixteen years old. They won’t even be eighteen until well into next season, but they’re worth the extra attention, that’s for sure.”

Kenny arrived at the last two columns of names on the board and looked at the carrot-haired Curtis Waters. He had his binder closed and appeared to be in a foul mood.

Miffed, Kenny bit down on his lower lip and asked, “Curtis, have you caught up on your workload yet?” Kenny glared the insolent coach to get his message across.

Curtis shook his head and replied, “Nope, and I’d like to talk to you about it after the meeting coach. If that’s okay with you?”

Kenny shot a quick disapproving glance over to his best friend, Lou, but then he nodded at Curtis, not wanting to distract the momentum of the group.

Kenny arrived the last bunch of names on the board.

Before Kenny spoke to Eddie Banks, Lou gleefully shouted, “Bring it home Eddie and then we’re done! Free beers for everybody at The Roundup...on me!”

The staff had a good laugh and Kenny commented. “Hold on guys. I still need to review Eddie’s list.” He looked at Eddie and shrugged his shoulders. “What’s the news, my man?”

Eddie glanced at his notes and answered, “Things are looking fairly good, coach. Last week I received two letters from topnotch players in Texas and Arizona. I’ll add them to my list of recruits in those regions. We’re making progress, slow but steady.”

Kenny capped the pen and dropped it into the metal tray beneath the whiteboard.

Relieved and ready for a break, he said, “Great job, guys. I’ll meet you for beers at The Roundup in about an hour. My brother flew into town this morning, so I’m going to give Trevor a call to see if he wants to join us.”

Eddie announced, “I’m off to the church to say a few prayers; would anybody like to join me?”

Earnestly, Kenny replied, “I need to take care of a few things before I meet you guys at the pub. But thanks.”

Phillip said, “I’d like to, Eddie.”

Eagerly, the assistant coaches scattered and quickly departed the conference room.

Moments later, Kenny was seated across the table from the irritable Curtis, and Kenny asked, “Tell me what’s happening, Curtis, because I need to know. I’ve been cutting you slack for weeks and weeks. Now, I understand you’ve got problems with your wife, but you need to start pulling your weight around here.”

Curtis tossed his pencil in the air and spitefully replied, “My life sucks, coach.”

Kenny’s eyesight wandered over the man’s freckled-face and orange hair. Finally, he met the gaze of Curtis and stated, “I’m sorry to hear that, I really am. And as you know, I’ve tried to help you as much as possible. I’ve loaned you three thousand bucks and I don’t expect you to pay me back anytime soon. But now it’s time for you to get on the ball, Curtis. So please try to get your life in order...you’re hurting the football program. Do you follow what I’m saying? Are we square?”

Curtis slammed his fists onto the table and exclaimed. “I’m trying! But everything is spinning out of control! Know what I mean, coach?”

Kenny felt a rush of anger rise within his veins. He pushed himself away from the table and strongly replied. “Relax Curtis! And yes, I do understand how difficult things can be. Jesus Almighty look at my situation with Athena! She’s in Thailand until Christmas because her boss at the bank has her on the fast track for success and wants her

to master the Asian financial markets firsthand. So, off she went. I hate the fact she's gone, but I support her one-hundred percent and we root for each other."

Curtis remained silent and Kenny offered some advice. "Curtis, take a hard look at your life during the next month. Try to work things out with your wife. Excuse me for what I am about to ask, but have you thought about going to church with your wife or to counseling?"

Curtis shook his head and hastily replied, "I told you the last time we talked about this. No offense, coach, but I don't believe in God. My wife does, and she goes to church every week. And, going to a marriage counselor is not my style, that stuff never works."

Kenny rebutted, "Millions of people would disagree with you, Curtis. But, I'm just trying to help. Tell you what. Give me a call after the break and let me know what's going on. Fair enough?"

"I'll think about it," Curtis mumbled, "we'll see." Curtis rose from his chair and asked, "Kenny, what are your plans for July Fourth?"

Kenny stood up, shook his head in disbelief, and escorted Curtis to the door. "Thanks for asking, and I know that you're just being polite. Anyway, I'm going to spend time with my family and a few friends, maybe do some deep-sea fishing with Trevor, Lou, and Eddie."

Kenny shook hands with Curtis and wished him well. After Curtis had departed, an uneasy feeling of gloom settled over Kenny like a toxic dust cloud and forced him to realize it was probably only a matter of time before Curtis erupted like a long-dormant volcano.

Chapter 5

Just before nine o'clock on a cool Halloween evening, twenty-one-year-old freelance photographer and zoo maintenance worker, Dante Brock fiddled with his butane lighter and cursed his bad luck. "Damn it! Come on baby, burn that rock cocaine for me one more time! Please."

From the discreet alley and shadowy vantage point of his parked car, Dante toyed with the dashboard's CD player and increased the volume of the music. With horribly bloodshot and glazed eyes, Dante looked across the street at a happy couple that was leading their child on a trick-or-treat escapade. The flaxen-haired Dante momentarily repressed his drug habit and watched the kid in the Casper the Ghost costume ring the doorbell of the Hiller Highlands home across the street. With twisted interest, Dante observed a dark-haired, broad-shouldered man greet the jumpy little phantom at the door. The man offered Casper a large bowl of candy. Casper grabbed a handful of items and stuffed them into his plastic pumpkin before skipping away to the next gig. Casper's parents waved goodbye to the man at the door. The man watched them move away before he closed the door.

When the coast was clear and the haunting, flickering face of the jack-o-lantern on the man's front porch was the only sign of life around, Dante unrolled a clear zip-lock baggy of crack. Elated, Dante stuck a small boulder of the pressed cocaine into the charred bowl of his glass pipe.

Dante lit it up and cooked the crack until it bubbled. Mightily, he inhaled the wintry fumes as if it were a life-giving force. After several tokes on the pipe, his blurry eyesight could barely tell the difference between the street lamps before him and the twinkling lights of the Bay Bridge five miles away. He shook his head and searched the car until he located his reliable camera. He pressed the automatic shutter button and snapped numerous photographs of the view until he was out of the film. Saddened by his life but feeling momentarily immortal, Dante tossed the camera into the backseat of his tattered Vega.

Time elapsed as if he were floating through the universe without beginning or end. He closed his eyes, grinned and mumbled, "I should own the National Enquirer or Gossip Magazine...nobody takes better photos than me. Dante is the king."

During his drug-induced mental vacation, a pearl-colored Cadillac pulled up to the curb across the street. Mindlessly, Dante fiddled with his San Francisco Zoo Employee's Mountain Gorilla key chain. Lazily, he glanced out of the car window at the expensive Caddy. For a moment Dante thought he recognized the burly man emerging from the fancy car.

The massive fellow was dressed as a Pirate, with an eye patch and a black three-cornered hat. Curiously, Dante eyed the big man but then shook his head vigorously and murmured, "Nah! It can't be? That isn't him, is it?"

With piqued interest, Dante watched the physically imposing Pirate stride onto the porch of the man who had earlier given Casper some candy. The Pirate removed his triangular brim and scratched his scalp before turning his head to the right.

Surprised, Dante slapped his face a few times to sober up and whispered, “How about that...it’s The Streak! What in the hell are you doing up here in northern California, Mr. Phillip Zanton? I thought you were retired and living in LA with your hot wife and kids? Everybody knows you’ve got millions from doing those stupid shaving cream commercials. Where’s your wife and kiddies on this Halloween night?”

Dante watched intently as the front door of the home swung open and the dark-haired man smiled at his guest. The man scanned the area as if he didn’t want to be noticed. Zanton stepped into the man’s house and the front door closed quickly. The porch light went off and Dante shrugged his shoulders. He searched for some smidgens of crack in his Vega but stopped when he noticed another light had been switched on in the man’s house across the street. The light seeping through partially drawn blinds.

Flabbergasted, Dante spat unintelligible words in the air and gawked as the dark-haired man embraced Zanton and passionately showered him with hungry kisses and urgent groping.

“Oh, shit! Homosexuals!” Dante exclaimed. “I thought you were a married man with two kids, Mr. Zanton? Aren’t you a naughty boy?”

Dante reached into the seat and snatched his camera. He whirled around and aimed the camera at the passionate couple entrenched in the throes of sex. Desperately, Dante attempted to snap some revealing photographs of the two men. The camera whirred rhythmically and then Dante remembered he had run out of film less than an hour ago.

“God damn it! Damn it! Damn it! Damn it!” He pounded his head against the steering wheel several times and moaned, “Just my luck! I hate you, God! You always let me down! It never fails!”

Momentarily crushed by his ill karma, he huffed and started the car.

Dante eased his weathered vehicle away from the man’s home. He leered at the oblivious couple entangled in the heat of the moment and angrily said, “You’ll be hearing from me, Phillip Zanton. You can bet on it!”

Chapter 6

“Tis the season to be jolly! ;Fa-la-la-la-la-la-la-la-la!”

A student merrily called out to me, “Happy holidays, Father Rudy!”

Gleefully, I traipsed across the McMillan campus on the second Wednesday morning in December as the familiar Christmas carol boomed from a coed’s dorm window. I passed by the bulbous dome of Election Arena, cut between Centennial Dorm # 3 and was soon flanked by rows of pine trees and spruce. I turned left after glancing at the church and admired its extremely tall twin spires piercing the sky.

“I feel incredible!” I cheered and continued marching towards the northern end of campus to the Washington Administration Building. I was pleased to see the holiday season in full swing. Lovely Christmas décor dangled from the street lamps and the white fence posts. I noticed red streamers, shimmering green ribbons, and numerous wreaths and holly. Bands of glittering tinsel were strewn over the ivory-colored fences and laced the footbridges in tasteful displays of joy. The ambiance of Jesus was in the air.

I was sweating profusely after having completed my daily exercise routine of a forty-five-minute speed-walk and 200 pushups at the all-weather track at the southern cusp of the campus. My ash-colored sweat suit had drooping stains of grime seeping from many places and my dirty Nike shoes were ready to be removed.

I glanced at the silver watch on my wrist and it was almost eight o’clock. A few minutes later I passed the L-shaped Jefferson Hall of Engineering and shortly arrived at

my destination. I wiped at my damp brow and used my right hand to yank the glass doors open. I scooted across the deep blue marble flooring and wound my way towards the Faculty Lounge in the Washington Administration Building. I entered the lounge and noticed about a half-dozen people scattered throughout the room.

I smiled at the group and loudly said, “Good morning, people! And, how are we today?”

An unfortunate looking severely bucktoothed man sipped at his mug of coffee and replied, “Fine, Father Rudy. My wife and really I enjoyed your Thanksgiving service a few weeks ago, and we absolutely loved your speech about family values and morality. It was bloody fabulous. Stirring. Say...I hear you might be in line to become a Cardinal. Is that true?”

I shook his hand and responded, “Thank you, Harold. Only the good Lord knows the answer to that, not me. So, how goes the fickle fate of our country’s economy?”

The microeconomics professor proudly answered, “Are you kidding me? The next fifteen months are going to energize our nation’s economy. With the rise of computer robotics and more technology on the horizon and the advent of the Virtual Internet upon us, a mere child could lead this country to the pot of gold. I’ve said it once and I’ll say it again, all we need is a President who stays out of the way.”

“That’s nice to know, thank you,” I said.

I turned my attention elsewhere and saw the voluptuous Barbara Yazzetti striding towards me in a tight forest green sweater and black pants. I steadied myself, after having evaded Barbara’s overt sexual endeavors since I’d met the sultry brunette three years ago.

Barbara walked up and fixed her emerald eyes on me. I glanced at her olive skin and long hair. She was an utterly stunning woman, but she was not for me.

Barbara licked her lips and provocatively said, “It’s a pleasure to see you, Father Rudy. Do you have a moment? I’d like to talk with you about something...in private.”

I glanced at Harold. The British man jostled his eyebrows up and down at me and grinned like a pervert.

I grimaced and replied, “I must apologize, Barbara. But I must get back to my chambers, so I can finish working on my holiday sermon. Can we talk later? Perhaps at the faculty party before Christmas?”

I saw the disappointment on Barbara’s face; she frowned, but quickly perked up and inhaled deeply, showcasing her bosom for me to survey one last time.

Barbara leaned closer to me and coyly whispered. “Whenever you’re ready to meet with me alone, just let me know, Father Rudy.” She pulled away but her hand gently scraped across my buttocks.

I twitched and tried to ignore the come-on. I picked up my stack of mail and left the building with a quickening pace.

About an hour later, I had showered and shaved and was casually going through a hefty mound of unopened mail from the past three days. I drank some cranberry juice and nibbled on a piece of banana bread spread with cream cheese. I picked up a large white envelope and tested its weight. I read the bold wording printed above my name: **Personal & Confidential.**

Curious and using a stainless-steel letter opener I sliced the package open. A glossy trio of black and white photographs spilled onto my desk. At first, I thought my

eyes were playing evil tricks on me. But then a sickening wave of shock whacked me across the face like a brutal right cross from a heavyweight champion.

I felt as if my innards were beginning to liquefy and I grew queasy. I leaned over and lurched for something hollow. I grabbed a gold-plated burial urn and loudly vomited into its virgin metallic gullet, spewing regurgitated cranberry juice and chunks of banana bread into the container. After retching, I examined the photographs carefully. Obviously, the pictures were the byproduct of an expert. They were flawless, diligently prepared, cunning and crafty. The initial photo clearly showed Phillip entering my home at night. Image number two was a crystalline pure shot of Phillip and I standing in the kitchen while tenderly kissing each other's necks. The third picture was the nail in the coffin. It was a glossy 8 x 10 impeccable snapshot of Phillip and I making passionate love on my living room sofa. I felt like my brains had bit lit on fire by Lucifer himself and large beads of perspiration formed on my temples. I peeked inside the envelope and noticed something else. I dumped out the note and read it twice:

To My Future Enemy (Father Rudy Quest),

When I originally saw Phillip Zanton step onto your porch on Halloween, I thought I was hallucinating. However, I quickly realized that the two of you are the real magicians because you've been dishonest. Your famous lover is going through a bitter divorce... and then I looked at your life! Oh My God! When I discovered what you did for a living, and that you might become a Cardinal...I laughed for a week!

So, here's the deal, PRIEST.

You & Phillip have two days to deliver \$500,000 cash to me - in person.

If you comply with my demands, you will receive all the photo negatives in return, and I will never bother you again. But, if either of you messes with me, I will auction off these photos to the highest bidder in the world.

I will call you at your office on Thursday afternoon. Be there!

May God have mercy on your two-faced soul and have a great day!

Insincerely yours...DB

Chapter 7

On Friday morning a crisp winter wind was tossing things around when Kenny parked his truck in the spot reserved for his vehicle behind the stadium. With his size-12 feet covered in his comfortable all-terrain Elk-skin boots, he slogged through the saturated grounds of the campus and entered the facility.

There was a bounce in his step, unlike anything he had felt ever before. He was feeling splendid and light on his feet. In terms of his loneliness, he could see the light at the end of the tunnel because Athena was due back from Thailand in two weeks. He felt like celebrating the confluence of great things happening in his life and coincidentally the faculty Christmas party was set to begin in a few hours. He whistled merrily and cheerfully greeted everybody he encountered along the way.

The football coaching staff's elderly administrative assistant bumped into him downstairs and said, "Hello, Kenny. Aren't you feeling chipper today?"

Kenny smiled at the silver-haired woman and replied, "Happy holidays, Joyce. Do you have any messages for me?"

She paused and then her eyes twinkled with remembrance. "Just the usual stuff, but I've also got something important to tell you."

"Go ahead."

Joyce furrowed her fleshy brow and said, "Your brother, Trevor called this morning and said, they have finally settled on a name for their newborn son."

Kenny was eager and impatient, and he urged Joyce along, "Yes?"

“Well,” Joyce offered, “He told me to tell you that, ‘he won.’ And, he said that you would understand what that meant. Does that make any at all sense to you, Kenny?”

The burst of laughter that came forth from Kenny surprised both. Kenny began to snort, and he bent over from laughing so hard.

Finally, Kenny got his funny emotions under control. He gazed at Joyce, pecked her on the cheek and filled her in on the secret. “Congratulate me, Joyce.”

She looked at him cautiously and asked, “What for?”

“I have a new nephew, and his name is...Charlie Brown!”

By one-thirty, in the afternoon Kenny finalized his agenda for the year-end coaching staff meeting due later that evening. He munched on a corned beef and cheddar cheese sandwich and washed it down with milk. Content, he placed his feet on his desk and watched two videotapes of football recruits on the television in his office.

He glanced at the Roman numeral clock above the doorway as it struck upon three o'clock in the afternoon. He sighed, yawned and returned his attention back to the television, but then he heard a knocking on his door.

“Come in,” Kenny blurted. He wiped the crumbs away from his lower lip and prepared to greet the unexpected visitor.

One of his most dedicated and diligent assistant coaches walked into his office with a crushed and depressed expression on his normally strong face.

Kenny examined Phillip Zanton, and asked, “Hey Streak, how’s it going? What’s wrong?”

The former pro athlete shook his head and forlornly replied, “Not good, coach. In fact, not good at all.”

Kenny rose from his chair and shook Phillip’s huge right hand. He walked around Phillip and then closed the door. Phillip sat down in one of the guest chairs and remained silent until Kenny was once again seated behind his desk.

Kenny examined the appearance of his assistant coach. Phillip looked like hell. His face was pale and chalky. His eyes were bloodshot, and it was obvious that he hadn’t shaved in a few days.

Phillip glanced up at the ceiling, exhaled forcefully a couple of times and flatly stated, “I’m in big trouble, coach. Big, massive trouble.”

Kenny’s internal alarm switched over to red-alert. Concerned for Phillip’s well being, he asked, “Is there anything I can do for you, Phillip? Anything at all.”

The only sound in the office was the staccato ticking of the second-hand arm as it skipped around the face of the Roman numeral clock like a mechanical heartbeat.

Phillip removed his beige skullcap from atop his head and folded it up in his hands. He tugged at his gray slacks and avoided eye contact for quite some time.

Eventually, Phillip stared back at him and replied, “Kenny, I need to tell you something.”

Warily, Kenny nodded and replied, “Okay. But please let me ask you something before you speak.”

Phillip nodded in agreement.

Kenny continued, and asked, “Is it personal, or professional?”

Phillip hesitated, and Kenny noticed that Phillip's upper lip was perspiring badly. Kenny grew more worried and he edged forward. A tense feeling permeated throughout his body and constricted him. He had always carried the symptomatic burdens of stress in the meat of his hamstrings and again felt those unwelcome sensations manifest in the back of his legs.

Phillip answered, "It's personal, but now it's also professional."

Kenny placed his elbows on the desk. He formed a tent with his fingers and said, "No more beating around the bush, Phillip. Please, just let it fly. What in the hell is going on?"

To an innocent bystander, it would have seemed peaceful in his office, but Kenny felt like there was a hydrogen bomb lodged between them and about to explode obliterating their lives before this moment forever. The relentless clock on the wall seemed to be ticking louder.

With some teardrops spilling from his eyes, Phillip said, "Coach, I'm a homosexual. And, I think it's about to be revealed to the general public against my will."

Kenny said nothing but felt the rushing sensation of his arteries pumping extra blood to his face. He gazed at Phillip and wondered about the unpredictable nature of life. He was blown away by the news, stunned and rocked, and upset. Confusion, disbelief, and a web of empathetic questions about Phillip's situation danced through him like mischievous sentries working for the devil. He bit down his lower lip and held his words in check. He thought. How can I help Phillip?

Kenny displayed his best poker face and asked, "What makes you believe that your sexual orientation is going to be exposed against your wishes?"

With a long, sad face, Phillip picked at his chin and replied, “My partner and I are being blackmailed by a lunatic for half a million bucks, and it’s due today.”

Kenny leaned back in his chair and felt as if an invisible assassin was tightening a noose around his throat. He tried to calm down, but then he glared out of the window and angrily spat, “Jesus of Madness! What in the f...”

Somebody knocked on his office door and he sternly barked. “Not now! Come back later! Goodbye!”

After a brief pause to lasso his composure, he asked a difficult question. “Phillip, is your gay lover *also* a member of my new coaching staff?”

Kenny winced after his query, unsure if his probing was an invasion of Phillip’s privacy. He stuck to his guns, however. Trust between them was more important than anything else. If two of his coaches were sleeping together...Christ!

A flicker of humor revealed itself on Phillip’s face. Phillip grinned and replied, “No, relax. I’ve only had two gay partners in my life. Right now, it’s the same man I’ve been seeing for the past five years. Then there was my first experience, with a gentleman from the bay area but that’s been over with for some time and I haven’t seen him in a while.”

Kenny responded firmly, “Fine,” and asked another question. “Phillip, what happens if you and your lover pay this blackmailer five-hundred thousand dollars?”

“I don’t know, hopefully, he disappears forever,” Phillip replied, “I’m so upset about this. I just want to keep my private life separate from my professional endeavors.”

“That’s a skinny tightrope for you to walk on, Phillip. You’re an ex-football star and you’ve got some great commercial endorsements. Don’t take this the wrong way but discretion will be tough for you to come by.”

Phillip massaged the skullcap in his hands and finally dropped the bomb Kenny had been waiting for. “Coach, do you want to fire me because I’m gay?”

Needing to vent, he hastily responded, “We’re in a bad bind, Phillip! A serious headlock for many reasons; first, I don’t care if you sleep with women or men. So, for starters, that’s not an issue with me. In fact, when I interviewed you for this job I never asked you about your sexual orientation, did I?”

“No, you didn’t,” Phillip replied, “however, I told you that my marriage was strong...and that was a lie. I’m sorry about that. My ex-wife and I have not slept together for several years. When you interviewed me for the job, technically I was still married although we knew a divorce was imminent. I never expected anything like this to happen and I’m terrified of losing my kids and ruining my career! I’ve got a fair amount of money stashed away, but right now my assets are frozen because of the divorce. I only have access to very limited funds until everything’s settled with my bitch ex-wife.”

Kenny stood up and walked over to the windows in his office. He looked at the beautifully renovated Bunker Hill football stadium; someday soon it would be packed with thousands of rowdy fans, and hopefully, he would still be the head football coach.

Kenny asked, “What about your two children, Phillip? Do your kids know what really happened between you and your ex-wife?”

“No God damn way, it would destroy them. In fact, my ex-wife doesn’t even know I’m gay. She thinks I’m involved with another woman. She knows *nothing*.”

Kenny shook his head and replied, “Okay. Let’s keep going. To the best of my knowledge, in California, it is legal to terminate an employee’s contract because of their sexual orientation. In fact, the state Supreme Court has avoided tackling that hot button issue, so right now we’re on shaky ground. Furthermore, this is a private college, and they can fire me and all of you guys just because they feel like making a change.”

Quickly, Phillip asked, “Coach, are you going to fire me?”

Kenny closed his eyes. He rubbed his face vigorously and thought. Blackmail, scandal, lies, and deceit; shit, I don’t know what to do!

Kenny pivoted and leaned against the windowsill. In a smooth calm voice, he said, “Phillip, I’m not going to fire you because you’re gay. As I said, what you elect to do in your private life is none of my business.”

Phillip exhaled with relief and said, “Whew! Praise Allah, and thank you, coach.”

“But,” Kenny countered, “if your personal life negatively affects the fate of this football program because you’re involved in a blackmailing scandal...then we’ve got a very, very serious problem on our hands. Your situation might tip the scales against us, and the entire problem could easily get ripped out of my hands by the powers that be.”

“I know,” Phillip said, “but I can’t change who I am, or what I desire.”

Kenny walked over to the white grease board behind his desk and replied. “I’m not asking you to change who you are, Phillip. But, we need to look at this from every angle to understand the possible ramifications. Are you with me on that?”

“Yes,” Phillip answered defiantly, “I’ve searched my soul about this mess, and prayed to Allah for guidance. No matter what, I am not going to resign because I’m gay.”

Kenny spun around and glowered at him. Finally, he couldn't contain his gut-level anger any longer. Pissed off, he demanded, "Chill out, Phillip! I'm on your side. Remember? I'm the guy who asked this college to hire you in the first place. Don't ever forget it! Got it? Don't ever forget it! Ever!"

A long silence hung in the air like an odorous stench, but Kenny was not going to say a word until Phillip breached the silent chasm between them.

"Sorry, coach." Phillip sat up taller and revealed, "I'm feeling defensive and to top it off my ex-wife is threatening to take the kids away from me because she thinks I've been having an affair with another woman. If she ever finds out I'm in love with another man, that bitch will ruin me forever. No questions asked."

Kenny growled and grabbed a black pen. He slammed it against the grease board, and it shattered into a few pieces. Droplets of dark ink covered his right hand like shadowy lesions. He took a few deep breaths and gathered himself. He stooped to pick up the broken pieces and tossed them into the garbage can. He grabbed a tissue and wiped the inky spots from his hand.

Coolly, Kenny stated, "All right, Phillip, these are the topics we need to consider if this blackmailing scheme goes public: recruiting, fundraising, campus politics, and how in the hell with the NCAA is going to deal with this issue."

Phillip nodded and replied, "As far as I know, there's never been a collegiate or pro football coach who's openly declared his homosexuality. Am I right, coach?"

Kenny said, "No shit, Phillip. And, when I meet with my superiors to inform them you're gay, and that you're being blackmailed because of it, they might force me to get

rid of you even though it's a very gray area. They could try and manufacture a different story and then cut you loose. Understand what I'm saying?"

Kenny gazed at him and waited for his reply. He chewed on the inside of his cheek and remained mute. Hoping for some clarity in this situation.

"I know." Phillip agreed, "The administration is trying to rebuild the program and they might not want to deal with this...at all."

Kenny nodded and asked, "Phillip, back when you were playing pro football in New York, were you friends with Rick Palmer?"

Phillip shook his head and responded, "No. Rick was murdered one year before I made it to the pros, but I've heard the stories about him. It sounds like he was a great coach."

Kenny responded, "He was a good football coach, but somebody killed Rick. They decapitated him after discovering he was gay." He came around to the corner of his desk and sat down on the edge of it and continued, "Phillip, I don't want to see you, or your children get hurt."

"I appreciate that coach, I really do. But if I quit now, then I'm a loser and I might as well run away from every challenge for the rest of my life."

"Phillip, as you know, our industry, from high school to college to pro, does not look kindly upon homosexuality regardless of whether it's a player or a coach. That's the way it's always been. Shoot look at what happened when that assistant professor from LSU tried to order an official NFL New England Patriots jersey online with Randall Gay's last name on it. Damn it, Phillip, you and I both know that Gay was a great Defensive Back when he played for LSU, but the NFL originally declined that

professor's request because she typed in the word gay onto the order form from her computer. If I remember correctly, the NFL's site reprimanded her for using a naughty word."

Phillip shook his head and replied, "I've known Randall for almost ten years, and I remember that bullshit too. What a crock!"

He observed Phillip as the big man replaced his soft cotton skullcap onto his head.

Kenny put forth another thought aloud, "There's another important issue we haven't talked about yet."

"What's that?" Phillip queried

"The Blum triplets," Kenny said flatly, "they're only going to be seventeen years old this season."

Phillip exploded out of his seat and towered over Kenny. The hostile intent of Phillip's maneuver was unmistakable, and Kenny knew it.

Between clenched teeth, Phillip hissed, "What are you insinuating, coach? Do you think I'm some kind of sick pedophile that gets his jollies by preying on teenagers?"

With great resolve, Kenny pushed himself off the desk and stood face to face with Phillip. Even at his full height, the crest of his head only reached Phillip's mouth. Phillip's hot breath poured onto Kenny's face like froth from a large animal. Kenny looked up at Phillip's blue eyes and witnessed the man's turmoil, pain and fury swimming within them.

Quietly, but sternly, Kenny replied, "No, I don't think you're a pedophile, Phillip. However, I guarantee you that other colleges who recruit against us will say and do

anything in order to hurt our chances of landing the Blum triplets, and every other good athlete we're pursuing. You can bet your ass on that for sure. Agreed?"

Phillip shut his eyes, took a step back and resignedly said, "I agree, and we can't let my lifestyle go public. It will ruin me and damage this program."

Kenny said, "This situation goes way over my head, Phillip. I need to meet with John McDough and Rebecca Jones, immediately."

Phillip opened his eyes and asked, "Do you still want me to attend our staff meeting tonight?"

Kenny showed Phillip to the door and replied, "Yes, and I'm not firing you. I just need to figure out the best way to proceed."

Phillip focused on him and before leaving said, "Thank you, coach. I appreciate your support more than I can say."

Kenny shut his eyes and nodded.

Rhetorically, Phillip asked, "This stays between you and I, right, Kenny? Please don't mention my name to anyone...ever."

Kenny gripped the doorknob and said, "Just follow my lead, and I'll do my best."

Chapter 8

Kenny shut his office door and sat down in the chair behind his desk. He touched the Intercom key on his telephone and Joyce's energetic voice greeted him from the other end of the line, "Yes, Kenny, what can I do for you?"

"Hi, Joyce. Please cancel my appointments for this afternoon. I don't want to be disturbed for the rest of the day. Thank you."

Kenny disconnected and then quickly dialed Athena's resident telephone number in Bangkok, Thailand. It rang several times and he murmured, "Pick up the phone, Athena. I need to talk to you, babe."

Her voice-mail came onto the line and Kenny slammed the receiver. "Crap!"

For the next hour, Kenny impatiently paced in his office and gazed through the windows at the football stadium, the soccer field, and the library in the distance.

He examined the empty seats in the football stadium and scolded himself, "Our first football game is less than a year away, and you just might get yourself fired before then. Great job!"

Shortly thereafter Kenny exited the facility due east and he worked through the mushy grounds under a steady rain. He zipped up his winter ski jacket and trudged across the wet pavement of Democrat Way. He looked to his left and noticed a troop of carefree students immersed in a game of soccer on the muddy field.

He questioned himself, "I hope that I'm doing the right thing. Shit!"

Kenny banked off in a southern direction. He picked up the pace and cruised by the Romanesque track and field complex and made his way towards The Spot.

Kenny observed the split-level, white stucco, and red-trimmed building. He saw many of his peers enjoying themselves immensely. He neared the entrance and heard one of his all-time favorite holiday songs, Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer. He was about to walk inside but several people greeted him. After making small talk and answering their innocent questions about the football program, he politely excused himself and searched for John McDough and Rebecca Jones.

Kenny explored the first floor in vain. He grabbed a bottle of Beck's beer from a tub of ice near the stairwell, asked a waiter to open it and bounded upstairs. He refused the delicious offerings of the tuxedoed catering staff and looked for his superiors. He savored the beer initially with a big gulp. The holiday music was much louder upstairs, and the party was boisterous and fun. He smiled at a few people and kept searching.

Kenny scanned hundreds of faces until he located McDough at the southwestern corner of the massive room. McDough was standing near a big stone fireplace, keeping warm and entertaining a posse of coworkers. Kenny marched across the tiled floor and heard McDough laughing above the din. McDough seemed to be enjoying his glass of rum-spiked eggnog, and Kenny surmised it was not McDough's first drink.

Kenny zeroed in on McDough's happy face and then McDough spotted him.

McDough's nose was rosy. He raised his glass of eggnog and exclaimed. "Here comes Coach Brown! To our newest Field General!"

Oh boy! Kenny mused. He flashed McDough a fake grin and stopped beside him. McDough's glossy eyes concealed the uncanny street smarts he was known for. Kenny

played it cool and chatted with each member of the small group until he could stand it no more.

Unable to refrain himself any longer, Kenny beckoned for McDough to join him on the other side of the crackling fireplace.

Upon ensuring that his words could not be overheard, Kenny gripped McDough's elbow and said, "John, I need to meet with you and Rebecca Jones right now!"

Eyes blinking, McDough tilted his chin towards the other end of the packed room. He slurred his words just a bit and replied, "That's going to be tough. She's over there with her husband and schmoozing with powerful alumni."

Kenny followed McDough's line of sight and said, "It's important!" He finished his beer and set the green bottle on a table next to the hearth.

McDough placed his glass on the mantle of the fireplace. His face tightened and he asked, "What's going on, Kenny?"

Impatiently, Kenny leaned closer to McDough and whispered into his ear, clearly detailing the potential blackmailing scandal swirling around them. He couldn't wait.

Startled and wide-eyed, McDough drew back from him and loudly replied, "Screw me! What the f...?" Obviously perturbed, McDough snapped his fingers a few times, grabbed his drink and quickly drained it.

He peered at Kenny and asked, "Who's involved?"

Kenny shook his head and responded, "Sorry, I gave him my word that I would do my best to *not* reveal his name to anyone, including you."

McDough eyeballed him suspiciously. He frowned, then nodded curtly and stated, "Let's go."

Kenny trailed McDough through the crowd. He followed in McDough's wake and earnestly hoped for the best. Phillip's earlier confession to him had developed into a new form and had created a life of its own. Now, Kenny understood he was beyond the point of no return. The bridge of regret had been torched behind him and he could not turn back now. It was time to take out his machete and whack at everything in his way.

By four o'clock, Kenny and McDough were in Rebecca's office on the top floor of the Washington Administration building. The President's sanctuary was immaculate and classy. The white, blue-veined marble floor shimmered beneath the overhead lighting. The high ivory walls were replete with a pattern of tiny red and blue stars on them in galactic fashion. Her U-shaped desk was cut from heavy slabs of Feather River granite, an expensive gift of appreciation from Percy McMillan. Kenny looked at the framed photographs of Rebecca posing with famous athletes, politicians and business moguls affiliated with the college.

Clearly agitated, Rebecca dusted off her jacket, fidgeted with her short brown hair and spoke, "Please John, tell me what this is about so we can take care of it and get back to the function. Potentially, there's a huge boatload of money at that party back there, and it's my responsibility to bring it home. Those people pay the bills, including both of your salaries. Got it?"

McDough had apparently sobered up long ago. He glanced at Kenny and remarked, "Respectfully, I don't think we're headed back to the party anytime soon, Rebecca."

Rebecca's face slackened. Kenny knew she didn't like the sound of McDough's blunt reply. He watched Rebecca remove her wool blazer and sling it over the back of her chair.

Kenny met her gaze and she asked him, "Would you like to tell me the news, Kenny?"

For several minutes Kenny recounted the scenario but did not come forth with Phillip's name. As he got deeper into the grimy details of the blackmailing scheme, Rebecca walked over to the trio of lean windows in her office and cranked two of them open. When Kenny had finished talking, Rebecca held silent for nearly five minutes.

When ready, Rebecca spoke in a reserved but fierce tone. "John, if this blackmailing garbage goes public, what kind of damage are we looking at for the college?"

McDough responded confidently, "As you know, we've got a bunch of football scholarships to give away on National Letter of Intent day in February. And, as you already know, our most powerful alumni and big-ticket donors fund two-thirds of our scholarships for men and women. Huge amounts of money are at stake. Massive cash."

Rebecca put a hand on her hip and said, "Cut the crap, John and give it to me straight."

McDough coughed and replied, "If the wealthy folks that support our football program are not hip to the idea of having a homosexual coach on our football staff...then I'd say we're screwed!"

She dismissed his vulgarity and replied, "Kenny, how would this type of scandal affect our recruiting base at the community college and high school levels?"

Kenny hesitated. Finally, he answered, “It’s going to be really nasty and we’ll lose many of our blue-chip recruits immediately. However, a few of them might not care if Santa Claus himself was on my coaching staff, they just want to play football.”

Rebecca flashed him an icy stare, “We’re not talking about Santa Claus, Kenny! We’re discussing a man who is being blackmailed because he prefers sex with other men. We’re talking about having a gay coach interacting closely with our young student-athletes, both in and out of the locker room environment. There’s a chance that some incoming freshmen will only be seventeen years old next fall.”

The hair on Kenny’s forearms rose up because her combative reaction surprised him.

He was about to speak when McDough tossed more coals onto the fire by saying, “Our opponents will do their best to serve our testicles over rice with blood gravy for lunch. They will punish us on the recruiting trail for a long time. Kill us.”

Kenny watched Rebecca’s face grow dark and she opened the last window in her office. She returned to her desk and sat down in her chair.

She looked at McDough and asked, “What about the NCAA, John? Can they hurt us with sanctions or anything like that? I need to know if the NCAA can reprimand our football program in any way. Any way at all?”

Kenny and McDough sat down in the guest chairs and McDough replied, “Who knows? That’s a tough one. I’ve never seen this type of situation before. I’ve heard rumors about certain female coaches that have been fired for bogus reasons because they were lesbians. I guess we can roll the dice and see what comes up.” McDough cleared his throat and finished, “The fundraising for our annual Valentine’s Day Golf tournament is

about halfway done. But, if this thing breaks loose now, it's going to be burning hell trying to raise the other \$300,000."

Rebecca agreed and looked at Kenny.

Kenny's nerves were hotwired, and Rebecca asked him the question he'd been waiting for. "Kenny, have you thought about asking your assistant coach if he'd like to arrange a generous severance package with us and sign a non-disclosure agreement?"

Kenny looked into her amber eyes and scouted the youthful complexion of her mid-forties face. Kenny shook his head and rubbed his hands on his thighs. "No, he's not going to resign, and I respect that. Are you going to force him out?"

Rebecca swung back to McDough. "John, what do you think?"

McDough smacked his hands together and said, "If we fire this coach before we've played our first game, then I guarantee we're looking at a wrongful termination lawsuit of staggering proportions. Gigantic! Besides, Kenny vouches for him."

Rebecca punched in a few numbers on her telephone keypad and said, "It's time to talk with Percy. He's in Australia, but I spoke to him this morning."

Soon, Percy McMillan's voice was coming through the speakerphone, "What a nice surprise. Twice in one day. To what do I owe the pleasure, Rebecca?"

Rebecca said, "I have John McDough and Kenny in my office now. We need to speak with you."

"Sounds serious," Percy said. "Good afternoon, gentlemen."

Kenny's nerves sent minuscule bolts of lightning zinging through his body. For nearly ten minutes the four of them explored many aspects of the unique situation.

After Rebecca had summed it up one last time, Percy exclaimed, “It’s fascinating and absolutely delicious. Kenway, if this story hits the press, your Caucasian skin will need to be thick enough to make Roy J. Plunkett proud.”

Kenny smirked at Percy’s clever remark.

Rebecca and McDough offered blank looks, and Kenny explained, “In 1938, Roy Plunkett invented Teflon.”

McDough and Rebecca nodded.

Rebecca offered, “Percy, it’s almost five o’clock here. I need to get back to the party before our VIP’s depart.”

“Of course,” Percy replied, “you and John should get back to the party to take care of business. I’d like to speak with Kenway for a minute or two...alone.”

Soon Kenny was alone in the President’s office and he listened to Percy’s first question, “Kenway, does it make a difference to you if one of your assistant coaches sleeps with other men? And, is his lover another member of your staff?”

Percy’s questions rammed an imaginary stake through his guts. Kenny felt his body tense up. His hamstrings tightened as they always did when things were shitty.

Kenny answered, “Boss, it never entered my mind before today. Normally, it wouldn’t be any of my damn business. But, if something like this can hurt our football program, then it automatically becomes my business...whether I like it or not. And no, from what I’ve been told, we’re only talking about one man on my staff that’s gay, not two.”

Kenny took a piece of chocolate candy from a dish on Rebecca’s desk and chewed on it while Percy talked. “Fair enough. Good answer, Kenway. It thrills me to see

you demonstrate such commitment and valor towards your fellow coaches and our football program. That's why I took the chance of hiring you, Kenway. You're a fighter. If you would have responded with anything else...then we would have parted ways immediately."

Kenny shook his head and with a sneering grin said, "Life is full of surprises. Right, Boss?"

Percy replied, "God has a plan for all of us, Kenway, and only the fool pretends to know exactly what it is." Percy paused and went on, "I'll be in Asia and Europe next week. Stay sharp, Kenway, because anything less doesn't suit you very well."

"Point taken, Boss. Thanks for your perspective," Kenny said.

"We have a long road ahead of us, Kenway." Percy opined, "The meat-and-potatoes of this story has yet to be cooked. Be wary and mindful. It would be wise of you to expect the worst, but still, hope for the best."

Chapter 9

Minutes after six o'clock that evening, Kenny and his staff were poised around their conference table at the facility and well into the meeting he was orchestrating. Quickly, Kenny flew through his agenda about the upcoming holiday break and had checked off the items on his list with a taskmaster's approach.

When most of the banter between the coaches had subsided, Kenny shut the door leading to the main office.

The overhead lighting seemed brighter than usual. Kenny felt slightly dizzy and lightheaded. His palms were moist, slippery and damp with nervous apprehension and anticipation of what was about to unfold. He came back to his seat and in a strictly measured voice said, "Gentlemen, we have a serious issue to deal with and it requires our immediate attention."

Suddenly mute, each man in the office turned to him and waited.

He acknowledged their silence with an inclination of his head and stated, "As of today, every coach in this room could find himself in an undesirable situation in the immediate future."

He paused and allowed his words to settle. He glanced down at the navy carpet and then looked at each of them around the table. Pensive interest and definite concern showed on their faces.

Jeff McMillan spoke up and quipped, "I hope that my uncle Percy didn't cancel the football program already."

Kenny huffed and shook his head. Some of the coaches were grinning but the rest were stone-faced and awaiting his words.

Earnestly, Kenny continued, “Gentlemen, after I tell you what’s going on, I need each one of you to promise me that this information will never leave this room. Ever. Fair enough?”

Eventually, they agreed, and Kenny went on, “I’ve already met with my superiors about this situation, and I’ve talked with Percy McMillan on the phone regarding what’s going on. Fortunately, we’re in agreement at this point, in terms of how we’re going to approach this challenge. It’s important to me that you guys understand that in advance.”

“What is it?” Keith Greene asked, fidgeting in his chair and massaging his enormous biceps. “You’re killing me, coach.”

Kenny raked his fingers through his hair and replied, “Be patient with me, Keith. Finally, if anybody wants to resign after I’ve told you what’s happening, then I will not hold it against you if this information stays in this room. Agreed?”

He recognized that his coaches were growing tenser and more uneasy. He watched them shoot furtive glances at each other. His own nerves were beginning to fray and immolate from the mounting pressure, and he strongly said, “Under no circumstances will I reveal the name of the coach who’s involved in this situation. No matter what.”

Purposefully, Kenny avoided eye contact with Phillip while his statement hovered in the air and cloaked each man at the table.

“Good grief, coach. Spit it out!” Curtis Waters blurted, “What in the hell is going on? It can’t be that bad. Spill the beans, damn it!”

Kenny rose from his chair and harshly replied, “Shut your mouth, Curtis! Sometimes it seems like you don’t know your ass from a hole in the ground!”

Curtis’ mouth fell agape from Kenny’s blistering reprisal.

Kenny ignored him and tried to calmly explain things to his staff, “One of us in this room is being blackmailed for a lot of money. And, there’s a good chance that his private life is probably going to be exposed to the general public. So, in order to beat this thing to the punch in case the shit hits the fan, I’ve decided to close ranks and rally our troops. So...here we are tonight.”

Craig Jackson patted his black hands around the periphery of his budding Afro and casually asked, “What’s the big deal, Kenny? Is one of us a big-time gambler that’s losing his ass at the racetrack, or in the casinos?”

Kenny edged away from the table and proclaimed, “Nope, but one of us is secretly gay.”

A long silence ensued. Then Lou Macaw shook his head and whispered, “Aw, shit.”

Inside the room, it seemed to become as vacuous as the bleakness of outer space. Kenny observed each member of his staff. They were examining one another for a telling clue. No words were spoken as each man underwent the eyeball test from his peers.

Eventually, after the burdening weight of the overall hush became unbearable, Brody Dunn broke the ice and asked, “Is it you, Kenny?”

A few of his coaches chuckled but Kenny sternly replied, “No, and I told you not to ask me who it is.”

Some of the men exhaled vociferously, and then Curtis Waters lost his temper.

Curtis jerked forward and shouted, “No way! You must be kidding me, coach? Screw this crap!”

Kenny noticed that Lou flinched at Curtis’ outburst. With his complexion reddening, Curtis bolted out of his chair and angrily rammed it with the back of his legs out of the way. His seat rolled away like a wind-blown Arctic tumbleweed.

Curtis glared at Kenny. He then pointed at him and hotly yelled, “I’m so tired of this whole McMillan College scene! You can kiss my ass, Kenny if you think I’m going to coach football with a God damn faggot on this staff!”

Kenny steeled himself to remain calm, but he wanted to brawl with Curtis to release his aggravation towards the unruly man.

He was about to reply, but Lou stepped into the mix with some words of his own, “Cool down, Curtis, and show the head coach the proper respect.”

Kenny nodded at him and said, “Thanks, Lou.”

Curtis was out of control. He sneered and shot back, “Respect? Are you joking? Take a flying leap, Lou! You’re just another minority that’s kissing Kenny’s ass so you can hopefully make it to the top! And you know what, Lou? As far as I’m concerned, you’re probably the dick-smoking, butt-pirate on this coaching staff. You probably love having sex with men! Right, Lou?”

Shouting and raucous outbursts of verbal exchange filled the room. Kenny anticipated Lou’s reaction before he could spring from his seat. Lou’s chocolate-colored eyes were swelling with retaliation. Kenny leaned forward and clutched Lou’s arm.

Kenny froze him with a bold look and said, “Settle it later, Lou. Not now, not in here. I’m telling you to stay calm my friend!”

With widened eyes, Lou glowered at Kenny. After a few seconds, Lou relented and sat back in his chair.

Kenny listened to the debates amongst his coaching staff. He pressed his palms onto the table and leaned across towards Curtis.

Breathing heavily and incensed by Curtis’ bigoted reply, Kenny reached out and grabbed Curtis by the collar of his shirt. Kenny hissed, “Shut your mouth, Curtis! Or I’ll throw you out of here forever!”

Curtis twisted in his grasp. Every coach rose to his feet, expecting a fight. Kenny remained focused on Curtis. His hot-tempered coach struggled in his grasp like a stubborn child.

Curtis grabbed Kenny’s wrist and angrily replied, “Back off, Kenny! You’re not going to fire me...because I quit! Do you honestly think I want to be part of this coaching staff after finding out that one of these guys likes to take it up the ass and put his lips on another man’s tool? You’re nuts! Anyway, you probably love gay guys, don’t you?”

Ferocious tidal waves of emotion surged through Kenny and his body temperature continued to rise. Curtis surprised him with a glancing blow to his jaw. Kenny grimaced and slammed Curtis into one of the grease boards on the wall. It clattered as Curtis caromed against the board and the back of his shirt smeared the color-coded names of recruits. Dry-erase markers flew from the tray and rolled across the carpet like tiny plastic logs.

After the tussle, Kenny noticed the other coaches encircling him for support. He waved them away, then he narrowed his eyes at Curtis and bitterly said, "It's a free country. Take a walk if you want to."

Kenny released his grip on his assistant's shirt, but then Curtis sucker-punched him with a crackling right cross to the left side of his head. Kenny's neck lolled, recoiled and then tightened from the nasty torque and whiplash of the punch. With his ears ringing, he wondered if his upper jaw had been broken. Without thinking, Kenny fired two left jabs at Curtis' freckly face, and the man's head snapped back. Kenny cocked his right fist ready to deliver a knockout blow. However, his first two shots had drawn blood from Curtis' right nostril. Out of arm's length, he waited to see what Curtis would do.

A tad woozy, Kenny stepped back. He cleared his thoughts, looked at Curtis and said, "Get the hell out of here! I made a mistake when I hired you!"

Kenny pointed towards the door and loudly ordered, "Beat it, Curtis. Now!"

He stared at Curtis. The man's face was crimson with hate and he stomped across the room like a crazy man.

Curtis reached for the door and yanked it open. He spun around and heatedly said, "You guys are a bunch of morons, pussies and cowards! You have no idea what kind of hell is in store for you! Do you? This program is going down the toilet and you'll be the laughing stock of college football! See you later, suckers!"

Curtis glared at Kenny and shouted, "You're going to regret messing with me, Kenny! I promise you that! Paybacks are brutal!" Curtis stormed out of the office and slammed the door with a thunderous clap.

Eddie put his hand on Kenny's shoulder and asked, "Are you okay, coach?"

“I’m all right, just let me relax for a moment,” Kenny said. “Thanks, Eddie.”

Brody tried to smooth things out by chirping, “Well, I guess it’s not him? Right?”

Kenny glanced up and noticed that most people in the room grinned for a split second. He shook his head and gently said, “No, it’s not him.”

Chapter 10

At dusk on Friday night, the full moon showered reflected light over the San Francisco Bay area as I enjoyed the sound of the Russian Opera in my home. An anguished woman's high-pitched voice boomed from the woofers of the speakers as if she were performing a solo in my living room. Carefully, I placed several stacks of hundred-dollar bills into the gaping mouth of a new stainless-steel Samsonite briefcase.

My kneecaps dug into the shag carpet on my floor and my fingertips were chaffed from repeatedly counting the small fortune before me.

After diligently checking the money one last time, I closed the case with a thud. I secured the combination locks and tested its reliability. Using my thumbs, I fidgeted with the black and white numeric dials until my chosen code was displayed. When I finished scrolling, the digits # 666 matched perfectly on both sides of the briefcase. I popped the latches simultaneously and the lips of the case sprang open. Pleased, I slammed the case shut and hoisted it as I stood up.

I strode across the room and put the Samsonite by the front door. I hustled over to my bedroom and searched my closet for a warmer garment to wear. Quickly, I donned a black leather jacket and slipped a matching calfskin beret onto my head.

Feeling strong I stepped from my bedroom, walked past the entry and into the kitchen. I rose onto my tiptoes and reached for the brass knob on the wooden cabinet above the oven. I pulled the cabinet door open and used my right hand to locate my long-forgotten ally. I closed the door and gazed at the eleven-inch long, pearl-handled titanium dagger in

my grip. The hefty knife jumpstarted the memories of my felonious past. Forlornly, I recalled my former life as a street-hardened criminal on the east coast, maiming and killing unlucky people because of their delinquent monetary issues.

Striding towards the entry hall I thought about the many lives I had taken with my trusty dagger long ago. I halted and once again recalled the night I murdered my older brother, Yakov. Even though I tried to block out that awful memory, it crept into my thoughts without warning. Maturity had caused me to honestly evaluate my past, and each time I did, my musings led me to revisit the sweet memories of my mother. That night long ago when I had run away from home with Kirov had slammed the door shut on the remainder of my life with her. I knew it then as a ten-year-old boy, and I knew it now.

I resumed walking and switched my thoughts to the bad choices I had made when I was marauding back east. I had been nothing more than a drug-running, hard-money collection thug specializing in torture and murder. Over the years the brutal homicides I had committed, had slowly morphed into a blur from one killing to the next as if the souls of my victims had become one abstract solitary being. I understood that those years ago when I was a much younger man I cared about nothing, not even my future nor myself.

I picked up the Samsonite and entered the garage. I pressed the automatic garage door opener and marched into action. I opened the trunk of my BMW and dropped the briefcase into it. I got into the driver's seat and thought about the positive life changes I had made since my despicable era of crime in New York. Upon entering the priesthood, my apathetic outlook had become more positive and forthright. I struggled desperately to put a wider canyon between the evil deeds of my past and my current incarnation as a man of God. Admittedly, always I battled against the ubiquitous presence of Satan. Each

day tested my willpower and sinful limits. The conflict did not visit my spirit randomly. Instead, the disunity and incompatible nature of my desires and the life I was living had far exceeded the bounds of irony.

I slid the knife into the inner breast pocket of my jacket and backed the car out of the driveway. I drove down the steeply hooking hill in front of my house and glanced towards the city of San Francisco's evening skyline. The dark waters of the bay failed to soothe my tensions. I felt my body and soul ready for a confrontation of life and death, my heartbeat increased, and my vision was detailed and fuller in scope.

A dampening chill was in the air. I looked at the pervasive glittering lights of the bay and said an earnest prayer, "My dear, Lord, please help Phillip and I make it through this terrible time together. Grant us the wisdom and the strength to overcome this horrible mess. Whatever you desire, dear Lord...I will obey it a thousand times over. Amen."

I steered my car down the remainder of the hill and onto the westbound lane of Highway 24. I cruised on the freeway heading for San Francisco and approached the Bay Bridge. I thought about my upcoming rendezvous with the mocking blackmailer and galvanized my resolve.

I chanted into the night, "Dante, Dante, Dante...I sincerely hope tonight is the only time we ever meet."

I drove across the bridge and wove through the streets of San Francisco that were riddled with the homeless. Eventually, I parked my car at the western-most edge of the city. For two hours I gazed at the white-capped rolling surf crashing against the sloping sands of Ocean Beach. The curling dark waves pounded the shore non-stop, delivering

relentless blows of the saltwater deluge. I surveyed the empty parking lot parallel to the beachhead and my eyesight lingered on the black skies hovering over the Pacific Ocean. My troubled mind wandered and suddenly came to a revelation. I pressed a lever on the door and my window rolled down. I turned my head and allowed the crisp night air to caress my rugged face.

I lectured myself solemnly and asked, “If I give this evil man our money, will he leave us alone forever? What should I do? Help me, oh thy beloved Lord?”

Minutes later, I walked eastward on Sloat Boulevard while clutching the Samsonite with fierce determination. The wide street was almost barren except for a motley duo of rundown automobiles abandoned near an antiquated diner across the way. I passed by a dirty bum leaning against a fire hydrant and my patience went haywire. I didn’t feel like stopping to assist the downtrodden and wasn’t in the mood to play Dr. Feel Good. I had a great deal of money lodged in the briefcase and significant amounts of distemper stored in my soul. The disgusting beggar extended his grimy hands towards me. I skirted out of the way and side-kicked the homeless man in the head. The filthy bum groaned and fell back, unconscious and apparently free of his own misery for a little while.

When I arrived at 46th Avenue I turned right and quietly scooted into some brushy undergrowth and high weeds. There was an extremely tall plank fence on my left and I heard strange sounds emanating from behind its wooden confines. I kept moving and found the illegally unlocked side gate I had been searching for. Wasting no time, I lifted the metal clamp on the gate and entered the well-kept grounds of the San Francisco Zoo. Filling up my lung capacity, I held my breath and looked for the telltale signs of an ambush or deadly booby-trap. I neither saw nor heard anything out of the ordinary but my

keen ears were picking up bizarre sounds from the creatures in the zoo. From off in the distance I discerned the lonely yelping calls of a Howler Monkey and the unmistakable rumbling purrs of large wild cats. Feeling more secure I double-timed it along the dimly lit paved inner roads of the zoo. The walkways were steaming wet and I could tell that they had been recently spray-washed.

I strode by a variety of exotic animals that seemed surprised by my presence at the nocturnal hour. A pair of zebras pranced away from me as I passed their holding pen. When I reached my destination, I slowed the pace and examined the scene. I viewed the dense foliage of the simulated jungle bush and noticed a set of benches poised beneath some trees.

“Stop right there!” A raspy but slightly familiar voice spoke at me from the darkness. It seemed to have come from a concealed vantage point behind the Grizzly Bear dens.

In a flicker of the time, my tormented soul reverted to my days as a merciless thug. Gone for the moment were my accumulated wisdom from the priesthood.

My laser sharp senses went on red-alert and I growled a demand at my unseen enemy, “Identify yourself...and show me your face!”

Nothing transpired but then a lemon-haired very unhealthy-looking young man stepped out of the night and into my view. I gave him the once-over and quickly took stock of my boyish adversary. Dante was not an intimidating physical specimen and he looked rather malnourished. His pasty face was lean, and I could see the thick arteries on each side of Dante’s skinny neck. Dante had the appearance of a heavy drug user and his baggy clothes were grimy and oversized. He had a trio of glimmering silver studs embedded in his nostrils and an unruly haircut that yelled of rebellion.

I finished evaluating the devious young man, quickly weighed all my options, and realized I would never give this punk the cash. In my yesteryears of New York, I had slaughtered more than a dozen dirt-bags like Dante, and my mind formulated a plan to dispose of him tonight.

I moved to the right and repositioned myself behind one of the sturdy benches. Location, the line of sight and possible obstacles were quickly registered.

I stated again, "Identify yourself."

The anemic young man lowered his face and replied, "Knock it off, Father Rudy! It's me, Dante, and it's time for you and Phillip Zanton to repent your sins...in cash."

I needed to test the IQ of Dante before planning my next move.

I put the Samsonite on the bench in front of me and said, "Dante, I was forced to cancel my Friday night mass because of you. So, if you want this money, here it is, come and get it."

Dante took a couple of eager steps forward. I saw that his bleary eyes were filled with greed. However, Dante stopped about thirty feet away from me and laughed. Without warning, a startling menacing roar from a lion echoed throughout the zoo. As the fierce sound dissipated into the night sky Dante seemed unbothered, but I twitched a few times before settling down. I stood my ground and gathered my wits.

When it was quiet, I asked, "Why, Dante? Why are you doing this to us?"

Dante showed his chipped teeth and stretched out his arms in a bogus gesture of compassion. I saw purplish track marks on the inside of Dante's thinly fleshed arms.

Dante shrugged and replied, “Do you honestly think I want to clean up this zoo and shovel elephant shit for the rest of my life? Not a chance, priest. You and your lover have screwed up big time by living a secret life. Your mistake has become my salvation!”

I discerned that negotiating was useless, and I asked, “Where are the negatives for the film and the copies of the photographs you took? Show them to me. Now!”

Dante removed a large envelope from the back of his pants and remarked, “Here they are, Priest. And, you’re lucky I didn’t charge you double. Cardinal? Phh...my ass!”

I stepped in front of the bench and replied, “I don’t trust you, but I have no choice. I must have faith in God and believe your words. However, if you ever attempt to blackmail us again, I will act swiftly and remove you from the earth!”

Dante seemed amused and my anger swelled within me. Dante rolled his eyes and casually replied, “Take it easy, Priest. I’m calling the shots, not you.” Dante pointed at the briefcase and ordered, “Open up the stash and walk over to that tree on your right. I need to check out the money. When I’m satisfied, then I’ll drop this envelope on the bench, and we’ll call it even.”

I shook my head and angrily stated, “No! My word can be trusted as a divine messenger of the Lord. But you carry the name of the devil himself and your twisted soul reeks of havoc!”

Dante smirked at me. I shifted my weight from side to side and said, “You had better think of a better alternative, Dante, or we’re going to be here all night.”

Dante glanced around and motioned for me to follow. I kept my eyes trained on Dante and we walked for a nearly a minute. During that time, I reached my right hand into my jacket and secured the cold handle of the lethal dagger.

Dante stopped moving underneath the yellowish glow of a caustic street lamp. I looked to my right and rapidly read the white sign between us:

Polar Bear Pit
Do Not Touch the Rails!
Danger! Keep Out!

I peered down into the massive crater but couldn't see any activity in the Arctic-like habitat below.

Dante flashed me an evil grin and said, "Put the case on the ground and open it for me. Do it now, priest."

Recalling my years of tactical lethal practice back in New York, subtly I slid the knife into the rear pocket of my jeans and knelt onto my right knee without Dante noticing from his distant position. I placed the Samsonite on its side, toyed with the combination locks and popped it open. Even though Dante was more than fifteen feet away from me, I noticed that Dante's facial expressions perked up when he saw the money.

Dante clapped his hands and exclaimed, "Oh baby! There really is a God!" As a distraction, I withdrew a stack of hundred-dollar bills and slid them across the ground like I was shooting a shuffleboard puck over a smoothly waxed surface. As the small pack of money skipped across the damp ground and came to a halt in front of Dante, I reached behind myself and grabbed the dagger with my right hand. At that moment, out of the corner of my eye, I noticed some stirring movements in the Polar Bearpit. There seemed to be a pair of gigantic cotton balls drifting aimlessly on the tundra-like ecosystem in the gully below. I heard loud snorting sounds but remained focused on my inexperienced but troublesome enemy.

Dante bent down and quickly scooped up the stack of bills.

Dante stood up and began counting the money. My well-aimed throw of the knife struck Dante in the Adam's apple like a miniature spear. The serrated-tip of my reliable blade punctured Dante's throat and sliced through his spinal cord like it was cutting through tender milk-fed veal.

I gushed at my good fortune, "Thank you, Lord!"

Dante's numbing hands released the wad of cash as if he were making a deposit at his local bank's teller window. His emaciated body crumpled onto the wet pavement like a deflating airbag. A thin stream of blood trickled down the center of his neck.

With a quickening step, I moved towards Dante like a thrilled hunter charged with adrenaline.

I watched Dante's shocked body convulse and twitch unnaturally. Dante gazed up at me in total helpless disbelief. Firmly, I placed the heel of my boot onto Dante's forehead and pressed down with mighty force.

I ground my boot into Dante's face with savage aggression. I mashed Dante's nose and grimaced with hate, "Arrrrrrrrggggghhhhhhh!"

I bent down and tugged at the pearly knife handle protruding from Dante's throat. I yanked it from my fallen enemy and listened to its slurping withdrawal. I leaned closer to the blinking and stunned dying young man, and I whispered, "Yes, Dante. There really is a God, but you will never meet him."

Dante blinked and his mouth quivered sheepishly, his only sign of death the tiny stream of blood ebbing down the center of his neck.

I picked up the envelope and tucked it into the front of my pants.

Without straining but remaining free of my victim's smattering of blood, I lifted Dante into my arms and carried him towards the railing of the polar bear pit. Calmly, I toted the sputtering young man with elegant and sublime grace, like a fireman evacuating an injured burn victim out of a smoldering building. With surprising speed, I whirled around three times as if I were hefting a bale of hay into a loft. After completing my final swirling motion, I let go of Dante's body and the perishing source of my torment sailed through the air limp and lifeless.

With a sickening thump, Dante's useless body crashed onto the ice-like terrain twenty-feet below. I heard a nasty series of wicked growls explode from the polar bears in the caverns. I leaned over the railing and watched in utter fascination as the biggest bear attacked the fresh meat that had unexpectedly dropped from the black skies. The massive beast tore into Dante's defenseless neck and ripped off his head with a mighty pull. The polar bear trotted away with its chosen morsel clamped firmly between its teeth. The smaller bear pounced onto Dante's headless body while the large bear devoured Dante's crunchy skull with devastating gnaws and bone-crunching bites.

Feeling satisfied by the outcome of the meeting, I gathered my belongings and cleared away the obvious clues of my crime. I walked over to a rest area and uncoiled a garden hose from a wall of the restroom. I turned on the spigot and spray-washed the area where Dante had met his demise. After executing my clean up duties I replaced the hose, wiped down the spigot and snatched up my briefcase. I touched the precious envelope secured in my jeans and headed back towards my car at the beach.

Chapter 11

On Saturday morning just before nine o'clock, I tapped my fingertips on the steering wheel of my BMW and kept the rhythm of my favorite Van Halen song, "Running with the Devil!" I sang with vigor and hummed along with a renewed sense of enthusiasm about my life and the direction it had taken.

"Thank you for helping me dispose of Dante's body, dear Lord. I am forever your humble servant." I chirped.

I guided my car along the narrow, shop-lined streets near the northwestern part of Fisherman's Wharf in San Francisco. I felt wonderfully exonerated about ridding the world of Dante, and Phillip had sent me an upbeat video email late last night promising to deliver great news. I was a few minutes behind schedule but unconcerned. Phillip would wait for me. I cruised along North Point Street and glided by the S.F. Maritime National Historic Park & Museum. I drove by the Fort Mason Center and followed the bend in the road before veering right.

I drove along the broad causeway of Marina Boulevard and parked my car near the sweeping green lawn adjacent to the earth's most famous saltwater bay. It was a nippy but cloudless winter morning and at least 200 people were out and about. Some joggers hustled on the trail next to the bay while other folks walking their dogs, roller-bladed, flew kites or strolled along romantically with their partners.

I stepped out of the car, grabbed my jacket and locked the doors. I shirked my arms into the coat and tugged it over my bulky red sweater. I dropped my jangling keys into the

front pocket of my khaki pants and took in the incredible view of the Golden Gate Bridge towering nearby. A steady breeze tossed my hair and I strode across the sidewalk onto the plush lawn of the Marina. With a sharp eye for detail, I observed a few gay and lesbian couples mingling on the grass while unabashedly enjoying their freedom.

My heart sagged with envy and I whispered, “Dear Lord, I really hope Phillip and I can do that together...someday.”

I moved over the turf and walked towards the water. I noticed sailboats and yachts floating on the uneven roil of the bay. I arrived at the slim path of the Marin and looked around. I found what I’d been searching for and headed towards the West Harbor and the St. Francis Yacht Club.

The air was mixed with delicious saltwater spray and for a moment I recalled the first time I had tasted seawater as a boy on that night with Kirov long ago. My alert mind pulled me back to the present and I savored the tranquility of the glorious day.

Standing alone on the edge of a skinny pier was my lover and friend, Phillip.

As I approached, I noticed Phillip had once again elected to downplay his normal appearance by wearing a dark brown leather baseball hat and sunglasses, with a cowhide jacket, faded blue jeans, and boots.

I came up to him and quietly said, “Phillip, I have great news.”

Phillip squeezed my hands and quietly said, “Rudy, I love you so much!”

I looked up at Phillip’s handsome face and replied, “Me too and I took care of our problem last night. He will never bother us again.”

Phillip gawked at me and cautiously withdrew his hands. I had the strange feeling

that Phillip was upset with me. Blood drained from my face and I searched Phillip's face for a telling expression or nonverbal clues in his eyes.

Phillip leaned closer to me and asked, "How? How did you take care of it?"

I answered honestly, "I met Dante at the zoo late last night. But instead of taking our money, that horrific person was devoured by a couple of polar bears."

Phillip seemed to be horrified, his eyes and mouth were agape, and his lips began to quake.

Phillip glared at me and with a reddening face asked, "That was you? I heard about it this morning on the radio. How could you do that, Rudy?"

I looked away. Quietly, but angrily, I replied, "Dante was a scumbag, Phillip and he was trying to control our lives. He deserved to be eaten alive. He had to die!"

Phillip edged closer to me and forcefully asked, "Did you murder, Dante? Yes, or no, Rudy? Tell me the truth!"

Upset with Phillip's lack of appreciation and support based on the circumstances, and annoyed by his naivety in dealing with the darkest side of life, I grew agitated. My fingertips began to tingle, and the ugly part of my soul began reheating within me. Instead of Phillip expressing gratitude for the harsh actions I had committed in order to help our lives, Phillip seemed affronted by my brutal reprisal against Dante.

I willed myself to remain calm and casually replied, "No, I did what I had to do. That's all. The polar bears killed him, not me, my love."

Phillip gasped, "Bullshit! That's insane, Rudy!"

I ignored Phillip's emotional statement and quipped, "I had no other choice, Phillip. Based on our circumstances, Dante had to go. I can't afford a scandal, and neither can you."

Phillip shook his head resolutely but appeared to settle down and responded, "You killed Dante...unbelievable."

Coldly, I snapped, "As I said, the polar bears ate him alive."

Phillip rolled his eyes at me and said, "No matter, I'm proud of what I did, Rudy. Last night Kenny held an emergency staff meeting and it went fairly well."

I had a quickening sensation as if my spirit had suddenly rocketed to the moon in a capsule of anguished torment. Astonished, I blurted, "What, Phillip? I hope you didn't tell the coaching staff that you're gay!"

"Of course not!" Phillip said defensively. "I will never tell them; you've got my word on it. I will say this, however...last night Kenny put his foot down in a very difficult situation. To make a long story short, if news of this gets out, then all communications must go through him. It's all for one and one for all. Kenny's going to try and control things. Especially, now that Curtis Waters has been fired."

In all honesty, I wanted to scream and choke the life out of Phillip until he was blue in the face. Desperately, urgently I wanted to tell him what I was capable of doing to resolve the conflict. But the grace of God overcame my rage and it was useless. I had to swallow my emotions since I would never tell Phillip about my evil past. Instead, I shouldered the blame in silence, trusted the Lord's power and decided to take another drastic step.

I replied, “You should have kept quiet, Phillip. I told you that I was prepared to handle everything, but that doesn’t matter now. Once the cat is out of the bag, it’s much harder to get it back in. Does that make any sense to you at all, Phillip?”

Phillip removed his sunglasses, shook his head and said, “I’m sorry, Rudy. I thought it was the right thing to do. Trust me, other than Kenny nobody on our coaching staff will talk to the press if this story breaks loose. They’ve given Kenny their word.”

I shook my head. “So, what! Their word! What about Curtis Waters?”

Phillip replied, “He’s no longer part of the picture.”

Realizing the depth of Phillip’s naivety about matters of life and death, and how the inner workings of the nasty world truly work, I purposefully steered Phillip away from his line of thinking.

I leaned against the deck's railing and flatly said, “Curtis Waters could become a major problem for both of us. Do you realize that, Phillip?”

Phillip shook his head once and quickly said. “I disagree. As I said, Kenny fired Curtis. He’s gone.”

I scowled, then calmed my nerves and replied, “Curtis Waters can cause more damage even though he doesn’t know it’s you. My dear Phillip, when we began seeing each other several years ago, we *agreed* to keep our relationship secret, no matter what happened. Even though you didn’t tell the rest of the staff about your or me, you should have never told Kenny Brown about your plight. Your actions were very unwise, and you have jeopardized your livelihood and mine, even though Coach Brown did not name you publicly. Certainly, you can see that now! Right?”

Phillip stood up, and for a moment I felt like we were going to slug it out to the death like the old-fashioned bare-knuckled American fighters in the early 1900s.

Phillip loomed above and pointed a finger at me. He sneered and spitefully said, “Rudy, without telling me in advance you’ve made me an unwilling accomplice to murder! That was not part of our deal, Rudy. You know that! You know I’m right!”

I stepped to the side and looked at a seagull overhead. The gliding bird defecated in mid-flight and its gooey excrement landed in the water like an oily drop of black and white paint.

I sensed Phillip’s eyes staring at me from behind.

Finally, I pivoted and countered, “Things are tense, Phillip, and we should take a break from seeing each other. The risks are too great, and neither of us can afford a mistake. If my secret life gets discovered I would forfeit my priesthood and lose the chance of becoming a Cardinal. It would ruin me forever. The Pope and the Vatican do not condone the watered-down version of Christianity, like the bastardized version supported by some factions of the Episcopalians. The Catholic Foundation is resolute in their direct opposition to homosexuality and I would be doomed if things got out.”

Sadly, Phillip said, “I know, and I don’t want that to happen to you...or us.”

Phillip wanted to reply. But I held up my hand and continued, “And, if Kenny Brown gets too much pressure from Percy McMillan about this blackmailing situation, there’s a good possibility that you might be forced to resign, Phillip. Your forthright approach has put him in a very bad position. More importantly than that, your children might be taken away from you because of all this. Your divorce is getting nastier by the minute and your ex-wife is an absolute monster. A true sentinel for the devil.”

Phillip tore off his jacket and slapped it against the white rails. A few pedestrians striding towards their yachts glanced over at us. I turned my back to hide my face. I was not going to engage in a lover's quarrel at the public forum of the Marina.

Obviously stung, Phillip urged me along and pleaded, "We're going through the most difficult part of our relationship, Rudy and you want to take a break! That's terribly weak, Rudy, and totally pathetic. You are supposed to be a man of faith!"

I stood in front of Phillip, looked up into his eyes and replied, "I am. But I'm not going to be a fool and ruin our lives, Phillip. If we play it smart, someday we can be together forever. If we act foolishly, then we will suffer greatly."

Phillip huffed and impatiently asked, "For how long do you want to take a break?"

I held out my hands and responded. "Only time will tell, Phillip. For now, our lives are in the hands of God. Both of us must trust in the divinity of the Lord."

Phillip had teardrops in his eyes, and he said, "I love you, Rudy. And, you're my truest love of all time."

Vital emotions burgeoned inside of me on Phillip's behalf, and I said, "I feel the same way about you, Phillip. But let's be patient and pray for the best."

I hugged Phillip as if I would never see him again. I felt Phillip's muscular back and husky physique rippling within my grasp. Time seemed to stand still and become petrified by the scope of my emotions, and I never wanted the moment to end.

Eventually, we walked towards my car and moved across the lawn of the Marina together. We arrived at my gleaming automobile and I opened the trunk. A couple of cars drove by and I removed a small duffel bag from the trunk.

I handed the bag to Phillip and said, “Here’s your half of the money.”

Phillip took the bag from me and walked away without looking back, forlornly.

I watched my emotionally crushed and despondent lover amble toward his parked truck off in the distance.

I closed my eyes and whispered, “Be strong, Phillip. Don’t worry, God will take care of us if we stick together.”

Needing to unwind and drain the poison of tarnished love out of my body, I stretched my legs for a while and meandered around the Marina. I felt like a wandering messiah, lost and searching for answers that continued to elude me as if I were trying to grab wafts of smoke. I used my fingers to rearrange my disheveled hair and saw a happy couple enjoying the morning with their little boy. The precocious child was doing an admirable job of flying a rainbow-colored box kite and I watched the pleasant scene progress while my heart filled with tender longing.

I stuck my hands into my pants pocket and moved in the direction of my car. I stopped about fifty yards from the vehicle and closed my eyes, listening to the squawking gulls and mercurial chattering from passersby. I turned my face upward and the tepid sunlight from the heavens felt as if it was reaching into the troubled ghost concealed within my skin and bones.

In a hushed tone, I uttered, “Dear Lord, I know that you are the supreme being of the universe. I love you, trust you and let you steer me. I want my life with Phillip to be complete and I know what I must do. Please, Lord; guide us with your divine leadership and show us the way to everlasting happiness. I realize that Phillip believes in Allah and goes by the teachings of the Koran. Phillip finds comfort in the Koran even though it

condemns his chosen way of life, and so do you, dear Lord, I know that. It saddens me that Phillip does not place his trust in you, dear Lord. But...my heart yearns for Phillip regardless of his Islamic faith and I cannot lie about that. Please help me find the strength to carry out the necessary deeds for Phillip and me to be together. I will do anything to make that happen!”

I held my eyes shut for the longest time and contemplated my life without Phillip. Nostradamus himself could not have seen it more clearly. A life without Phillip was like a fish living without water, possible only for a very short period but terminal beyond that.

Chapter 12

A few hours later, Kenny hugged Touchdown goodbye and refilled her dog bowls with fresh water and canned food mixed with dry nuggets.

He spoke to her and rubbed her rusty colored coat, “Touchdown, my life has taken some turns that I didn’t see coming. It’s bizarre.”

His dog heard a noise and ran off towards the other side of the house. While she was gone Kenny scouted the branches of the oak trees and the sweet-smelling pines in his backyard. He didn’t see the flock of Amazonian Parrots that usually visited his land from time to time after having escaped from the Oakland Zoo a few years ago. He wasn’t too disappointed and knew that the birds would eventually return in their own time.

Kenny walked through his house, grabbed his overnight bag and donned his ski jacket. Minutes later he was driving his truck on Highway 680 North. He crossed over the Benicia Bridge and merged with Highway 80 East.

Thirty-five minutes later he was in the marshy and expansive city of Fairfield heading towards Travis Air Force Base of the United State Military. He wove down the road leading to the entrance and eventually pulled up next to the guard station on his left. He rolled down his window and greeted the uniformed men. A serious looking and a fully armed black man dressed in blue and gray camouflage locked eyes with him. The guard feathered a pistol strapped to his waist. His blonde-haired and Caucasian male partner was positioned off to the side. Suspiciously the blonde guard eyeballed him and surveyed his truck for nearly a minute.

The black soldier finally asked, “Could you please state your name, sir, and show me your driver’s license and passport?”

Kenny nodded. He reached into his duffel bag, extracted his passport and clearly replied, “Kenway Alan Brown.”

The guard examined the information on his own clipboard. Apparently satisfied, the soldier looked up and asked, “Mr. Brown, please recite your password for me.”

Patiently, Kenny answered, “The last patriot.”

Both guards smiled and the blackguard replied, “Very good, Mr. Brown.” He straightened up and pointed down the road towards the innards of Travis Air Force Base. “They’re expecting you. Please park your truck next to the Western Annex and we’ll take care of it while you’re gone.”

“Thank you and keep up the good work,” Kenny said as he drove away.

Soon Kenny stopped his truck and found himself impressed by the amazing display of aeronautical technology surrounding him. Small jets and massive cargo planes were poised on the tarmac, and troops of bustling military personnel were moving back and forth with a clear sense of purpose.

A nice-looking brunette woman in full uniform greeted him. Kenny followed her into a broad building and through a maze of hallways. He walked through a doorway and was immediately welcomed by a short, gray-haired gentleman who rose from his desk and extended his four-digit right hand.

Kenny shook his maimed hand and said, “It’s an honor to meet you, Colonel Reagan. I’m a big fan of yours.”

The colonel grinned and replied, “The pleasure’s all mine, Kenny. Anybody who works for Percy McMillan will always get my vote. The McMillan family donates 500 million dollars a year to this country’s armed forces, and we owe them a debt of gratitude.”

Kenny whistled and remarked, “Wow, and I thought my small contribution was worth mentioning last year.”

The colonel winked at him and grabbed a piece of paper from his desk. He said, “Please don’t be offended, Kenny, but before we go any further you’ll need to sign this document.”

Kenny searched the colonel’s light brown eyes and asked, “What does it say?”

The colonel handed him a pen and explained, “Two things...number one, that you’ll never discuss this trip with anyone, and, if for some reason your transport jet crashes, then the United States military will not be held liable.”

Kenny shrugged, and then he read the document and signed his name.

The colonel’s face relaxed and he asked, “Kenny, do you have any idea where you’re going tonight?”

With trepidation in his voice, Kenny replied, “No. Not yet.”

Colonel Reagan smiled and answered, “Amsterdam, Holland. I spoke with Percy McMillan this morning. He’s got a two-week vacation in the Fiji Islands coming up. That’s why you’re getting the high-speed flight across the Atlantic Ocean tonight. Percy usually gives us a few days’ notice when he needs our services. So, this must be extremely important to him. Good luck and have a safe trip.”

Kenny was growing increasingly more worried. He hadn't talked with Percy lately and didn't know what to expect from the impromptu meeting arranged by his boss. One of Percy's assistants had simply called with instructions for him to bring a change of clothes, his driver's license and passport to Travis Air Force Base.

Kenny followed the colonel down a long breezeway. They entered another small room and the colonel said, "Commander Blane will be here shortly. Blane will be escorting you to Europe. Take a seat, and it was a pleasure meeting you, Kenny."

They shook hands, the colonel departed, and Kenny waited for Blane to arrive. Minutes elapsed and then a younger fellow entered the room. The chestnut haired, tan and green-eyed man was diminutive and had a perfect set of white teeth. He was dressed in a dark gray flight suit and black military boots.

"I'm Commander Rick Blane. Good to meet you, Kenny. I played quarterback at the Air Force Academy and I'm a big fan of your brother's."

After introducing himself Kenny sat down again and the lights turned off. A video screen descended on the wall in front of him and a color image of the American Flag appeared.

Commander Blane said, "This montage will give you a peek at our bird for the trip. It's on the tarmac right now undergoing last-minute maintenance checks."

A sexy sounding female voice began narrating the video, "In the 1950s, President Eisenhower wanted to increase the caliber of our military's top-secret aircraft. To make our reconnaissance airplanes and attack jets more efficient and radar evasive, he commissioned a research study called, Project Rainbow."

An incredible jet appeared on the screen. Kenny sat up and said, "Impressive."

Commander Blane slapped Kenny on the knee and concurred, “She’s beautiful.”

Kenny observed the long, cigar-shaped dual jet airplane. It reminded him of the fascinating toys that he and Trevor had played with as kids.

The female narrator continued, “In 1998, the ROX-33 became fully operational. It can fly at a maximum altitude of 79,000 feet above sea level. It has a range of 15,000 nautical miles and can cruise at an average speed of Mach Three. The ROX-33 is 121 feet long and has a wingspan of 68.5 feet.”

“Amazing design,” Kenny said respectfully.

“Sure is. Now it’s time to go.” Blane stood up. The lights came on and Kenny followed him through the door.

Shortly thereafter Kenny was in the men’s locker room and dressed in a charcoal flight suit and dark boots. He held onto his duffel bag and Commander Blane tossed him a midnight blue helmet.

“That should fit your noggin just right. There’s a tracking device built into it and two more bird dogs stitched into your flight suit just in case I lose you tonight.”

Kenny fit the helmet onto his head and asked, “I thought you guys flew with tinted visors, not clear ones like this?”

Commander Blane led Kenny out of the building and into the dusky night, and replied, “These particular lenses adjust according to the amount of sunlight in the cockpit.”

Kenny felt the wind rapping against his chin. He trailed Commander Blane with a cocktail of excitement and fear mixing within his veins. When he spotted the jet, his knees felt momentarily wobbly from the adrenaline rush it caused. The aircraft had a

wicked-looking lightening rod jutting from its nose like the dangerous tusk of a Narwhal. Powerful turbo-jet engines flanked the jet and each turbine had a razor-like fin sprouting from the centerpiece of its shell.

In time, Kenny was in the navigator's seat with an elephantine-like breathing mask and air supply hose covering his face. He looked at the glowing yellow gadgets in front of him from his seat behind Commander Blane's location. Kenny listened through his headphones as Blane communicated with the tower. Kenny glanced at the tiger-orange sunset while a voice from the tower responded, "Lane number two is clear...have a safe trip, Free Bird."

Commander Blane replied, "Affirmative, Eagle's Nest and all systems go."

The jet picked up speed and shot down the runway like a rocket. The roaring noise was deafening. Kenny felt like he was trapped between a pair of huge vacuum cleaner engines that were screaming at each other. From the thrust of the torque, his head was forced back against his chair. He decided to relax and flow with the power of the airplane.

"Hold on, Kenny!" Commander Blane blurted, "We're going to climb!"

Kenny felt like the skin on his face was made of Silly-Putty. The incredible jet lifted into the air and streaked towards the atmosphere like a dark angel trying to make its way back to heaven. Eventually, the aircraft leveled out at an altitude of 76,000 feet above sea level.

Commander Blane asked, "How are you doing, Kenny?"

Kenny was short of breath but managed to say, “Whew! This is fantastic!” He looked down and observed the bluish image of the earth. He felt like an astronaut and never wanted the journey to end.

Commander Blane asked, “Would you like to see what this jet can do?”

“Yes,” Kenny responded.

Without warning Commander Blane guided the jet through a series of high-altitude spinning maneuvers. Kenny felt as if he was trapped in a big kaleidoscope that was being toyed with by the hands of an unseen giant. Vivid colors on the earth’s surface and thousands of shooting stars flashed by him at a bewildering clip.

Eventually, when the journey calmed down they talked for several hours. Kenny made sure to keep quiet when Blane was communicating with their allies on the ground and in the air. They passed above the frigid waters of Baffin Bay and glided over the frozen tundra of Greenland. Kenny focused on his upcoming meeting with Percy. He realized Percy was eccentric and demanded his employees be available at the drop of a hat. He also understood that Percy was not fond of speakerphones or video conferencing. His boss preferred face-to-face meetings and was more than willing to foot the bill to fulfill his own needs. Percy liked to control things from beginning to end. He respected Percy’s ability to assess people and unearth their motives, but he wondered about the nature of this hastily called meeting with one of the richest men in the world.

Commander Blane dipped the airplane to the right and said, “The North Sea is down there. Look at the sunrise, Kenny, and get ready to visit the Netherlands.”

Kenny watched the luminous crest of the sun as it crawled over the eastern horizon. Instantly, his eye-shield began doing its protective job. The lens covering his face changed from being clear to a rich shade of iridescent purple.

“It’s beautiful,” Kenny said wistfully.

The speeding aircraft continued its descent towards Holland. Kenny pondered the context of his impending meeting with Percy. More importantly, he thought about the inherent frailty of his job security and his fate as the head football coach of McMillan College.

Chapter 13

Just before nine-thirty on Sunday morning, the United States Air Force reconnaissance jet touched down on the unseasonably warm tarmac of the Royal Netherlands Air Force Base in Eindhoven, Holland. Kenny had a few things to do. He used the restroom and changed into civilian clothing before locating his ride to Amsterdam. Commander Blane confirmed their return flight for the next morning, then sauntered away with his peers to enjoy “lunch and pleasures” at the officer’s club near the base.

In short time Kenny was standing outside the airbase when an indigo-colored Rolls Royce stopped in front of him. The driver stepped out of the fancy car and Kenny examined the attractive Asian woman wearing a black beret. She was dressed in tight oil-black pants, inky shoes and a matching cashmere sweater showcasing her ample bust.

She smiled and opened the rear passenger door, “Good morning, Mr. Brown, my name is Heather. Did you have a pleasant flight?”

He greeted Heather and double-checked his wardrobe to ensure he wasn’t underdressed for his gathering with Percy. His black slacks, matching loafers, lightweight sweater, and winter jacket seemed appropriate. It seemed to be abnormally warm for that time of year in northern Europe, but Kenny still noticed steamy breath emerging from his nostrils and mouth. It was cold, not freezing.

As the low winter sun sprayed its diluted rays of light over the peaceful bowels of Holland, Kenny unwound in the backseat of the Rolls. He viewed the Dutch countryside and attempted to escape his pent-up thoughts while drifting through a land of foreigners. He smiled at the irony of receiving one of his innermost travel wishes granted, having always wanted to visit Europe but never imagining it would be like this.

Nonchalantly, as though Heather had done it a million times before, she conversed with him and steered the handmade vehicle northeast on Freeway 27. They reached the junction of Freeway 2, south of Utrecht and merged with the smooth speedway that would eventually take them into Amsterdam.

They coasted through the southernmost region of the Gouda Valley and the breathtaking view caused him to wish for a reliable digital camera. The ancient local cheese farms triggered his hunger and the timeless design of the Hansel & Gretel villages was unlike anything he had ever seen.

Several years earlier while attending State University in California, he learned that the Netherlands had once been flooded by the tides from surrounding bodies of water. A great deal of the country's real estate was sequestered below sea level. He recalled the interesting story about the French King Louis XIV. In the year 1672, the ambitious ruler tried to invade and conquer Holland, but the Dutch people anticipated his every move and thwarted him as if playing with a child. The Dutch cut opens the formidable dikes protecting their beloved homeland and the lovely Amsterdam became an inaccessible and temporary island surrounded by the watery fingers of the North Sea.

Heather drove the Rolls into the elaborate ancient city of Amsterdam. Kenny marveled at the 1,000-year-old architectural gems surrounding him and acquired the

feeling as if he had been transported back through time. He saw winding canals, brick bridges, and multi-storied gingerbread-like buildings. There were a plethora of flat-bottomed boats along the banks of each waterway and an elegant Indonesian café or European restaurant every twenty meters. He was famished but realized his appetite would have to wait.

Heather looked at him via the rearview mirror and said, “Kenny, I’m going to pull over. Mr. McMillan’s office is up there, in that nice building above Rembrandt Square.”

Minutes later when Kenny walked into Percy’s place of business, he was once again appreciative of the deliberate and tasteful display of supreme wealth and classic culture. The ninth-floor walls of Percy’s global empire in Amsterdam were adorned with oil paintings done in the mid-1600’s by the famous Dutch painter, Rembrandt van Rijn. The Night Watch – one of Rembrandt’s most famous and swashbuckling Musketeer-like masterpieces caused him to stop and linger.

One of Percy’s youthful, middle-eastern male assistants introduced himself as Amir. Kenny followed Amir across the burgundy carpet. He dragged his fingertips over the shiny 22-Karat gold painted walls before entering Percy’s suite overlooking the statue of Rembrandt in the city’s gated park garden below.

Amir departed and Kenny removed his jacket. He draped it over a chair and placed his duffel bag beside it. He gazed at the most inspiring saltwater aquarium he had ever seen. The mammoth, harp-shaped tropical fish habitat dwarfed everything in Percy’s office and seemed to rise from the floor seamlessly. It stood at least a foot taller than he did and glowed like a huge jewel. A spellbinding array of vibrantly colored fish drifted through their aquatic laps while he examined the species in the tank. He noticed some wary blue

crabs, a few turtles, a small green eel, a cuttlefish and a shy octopus hiding in the bright coral.

Percy walked in and greeted him, “Good afternoon, Kenway. Did your trip enamor you with even more respect for the United States military?”

Kenny rolled his eyes and said, “Yes, it was incredible, thank you, Boss.”

Percy removed his giraffe skin coat and Kenny was reminded of Percy’s great height.

Percy tossed his jacket onto the desk and hailed a woman named Clarice.

A chunky redheaded woman appeared in the doorway and Percy stated, “Hello, Clarice. Please reroute my incoming calls back to my office in Paris. I’ll be there tomorrow morning. I do not want to be disturbed at all, thank you.”

Percy looked back at him and twitched his right index finger. He motioned for him to follow and they shuffled towards the aquarium. Percy stopped in front of a small table and reached out for a solid gold chest with the initials PM engraved on its lid. Percy opened the box, grabbed a petite net and dipped it into a bowl adjacent to the table. He scooped out some unsuspecting neon guppies without skipping a beat.

Percy held up the struggling fish.

Kenny wondered if his boss was sending him a non-verbal message, and he watched the doomed fish squirm and thrash violently for their lives.

Gently rolling the net back and forth like a symphony conductor moves his hands, Percy asked, “I understand that Curtis Waters has become our enemy. Does that surprise you, Kenway?”

He watched the billionaire plop the guppies into the dangerous waters of the aquarium. Without remorse, a pair of pumpkin-colored fish sucked them down in a display of mind blurring underwater acrobatics.

Kenny replied, "I thought Curtis might blow a fuse. But he's a jerk, Boss, and I'm glad he's out of my hair."

Percy raised an eyebrow and said, "You are mistaken, Kenway. Curtis Waters is not out of your hair, in fact, he's going to make a rat's nest of it as sure as you and I are standing here right now. The world is full of idiots, Kenway. To be frank, I was surprised you actually hired one."

Kenny stiffened and bit his lip in a flash. Quickly, but politely, Kenny fired back, "Fortunately, I only hired one knucklehead...and not two."

Percy smirked and inclined his head to examine the merciless killings taking place in the aquarium, and eventually retorted, "All of us make errors and deserve forgiveness, Kenway." Percy faced him and continued, "Curtis Waters will try to sabotage our football program and ruin the reputation of my school. You are aware of that, right Kenway?"

A shiver went through his body. Humbly, Kenny replied, "Yes, Boss." He trailed Percy to a marble bar trimmed with polished emeralds and yellow sapphires. Percy grabbed a blood red bottle from a shelf and poured two double-shots of a dark liquid. He handed one of the small glasses to Kenny.

Kenny examined the drink and Percy stated, "It's pure velvet. Sixteen-year-old Kiwi brandy with fermented rose petal juice. Trust me, Kenway." Kenny sampled the beverage and it was remarkably smooth.

He wanted to calm his nerves, so he finished his drink and asked, “Boss, would you please like to tell me what’s going on?”

He watched Percy stride over to the windows overlooking Rembrandt Square.

His boss stared down at the garden more than a hundred feet below them and asked, “Do you know why John McDough and Rebecca Jones work for me, Kenway?”

Kenny waited and Percy answered his rhetorical query, “I only employ people who want to make things better. McDough and Rebecca want to change the future of our entire athletic program. I don’t believe in hiring retreads or has-beens, Kenway, that’s the main reason I hired you. You have something to prove, Kenway. I admire that. You also have a solid reputation, mutually enhanced by people I know and trust.”

Kenny chewed on a piece of ice and asked, “What kind of changes are you talking about?”

His boss turned around slowly and flashed him a mischievous smile. “Why should we settle for the norm, Kenway? I expect you to build us a winner, not an average team.”

“Of course, me too,” Kenny replied.

Percy stretched out his long legs and remarked, “That brings me to my next topic...recruiting. Almost every football coach in the country is going to barbeque your ass, Kenway because you’ve decided to support a homosexual football coach on your staff. That’s never happened before, and I expect our opponents to circle the wagons against us. And, they will shoot away at us until they think we’re finished.”

Kenny waited to ensure Percy was done and retorted, “I know, but I’m not going to fire one of my coaches because he’s gay. I did not ask him about his sexual orientation before I hired him. So, to me, it’s unfair to hold that against him now.”

Percy shook his head. “You misunderstand me, Kenway. I value the loyalty that you have regarding your assistant coaches. However, I’m curious about the boundaries of your commitment to them. How far are you willing to go with this? Where is your pain threshold? At what point will you cry, uncle? Are you willing to lose your job over this?” Kenny went rigid and his entire body felt like it was compiled of rusty iron. After a long pause, he huffed, “My actions speak louder than words.”

“Fine,” Percy said, “but don’t be hasty, Kenway. Recruiting is going to be a major issue. Humungous.”

“True,” Kenny said, “And it’s going to get ugly.”

Percy gave him a slight nod and remarked, “That’s a given, Kenway. One needn’t be clairvoyant to see that coming. Think long term and see your future. The media is going to attack you, Kenway, regardless of your position. If you had terminated the assistant coach that ‘came out of the closet,’ we undoubtedly would be facing a very unpleasant lawsuit. But you didn’t take the easy way out and you didn’t fire him. So now, the media will test your resolve in other ways. To be straightforward, do you understand what I am trying to tell you, Kenway? Can you see the freight train that’s headed your way?”

Nervous tingles seemed to burrow out from Kenny’s neck and crawl down his back. He pursed his lips and replied, “Nobody on my staff knows who it is and I’m going to keep it that way so I can control the situation the best way I can. Also, it keeps my anonymous assistant coach from getting singled out by our opponents and the media.”

Percy scoffed, “Clearly, you don’t see the tonnage of what’s coming at you, Kenway. Sadly, my hopes regarding your ability to see the big picture all at once have been temporarily dashed. However, I tend to agree with your decision to keep the coach’s

identity under wraps. Obviously, you're honoring his wish and you cannot be blamed for that. Since you gave the man your word, you must honor it."

"Of course," said Kenny, "but no offense, you already know I'm not afraid of the media. The media has its purpose, but they frequently misjudge people. Just look at who TIME magazine chose as their Man of the Year in 1938."

Percy seemed bemused, and he replied, "That's true, Adolph Hitler was not a good choice. They guessed wrong that time and blew it."

Kenny felt uncomfortable beneath Percy's apparent bath of condescending words, and he responded, "Boss, are you questioning my intelligence?"

"Never," Percy explained, "and your face is turning red. Ease up, Kenway. I find myself intrigued by the raging turmoil that feeds human conflict. Nothing grabs my attention like a passionate tale of desire, justice, and morality."

There was a hint of compassion in Percy's voice and Kenny realized his boss was speaking from the heart. Kenny closed his eyes and thought about his biological father, hoping and praying that his spirit was looking down on him from above.

Percy reclined slightly in his chair and said, "Return from the fathoms of your own thoughts, Kenway, and open your eyes. I relish the true meaning of your name. It's one of the minor reasons I hired you. It was the cherry on top of the sundae, so to speak."

He looked into Percy's cold blue eyes and remained silent. Understanding that the billionaire would always keep a mote's distance of emotional safety between them, regardless of how well everything seemed to be going.

Finally, Kenny decided to get personal with his boss. "My biological father picked our names before Trevor and I were born. My father knew he was going to die. He

didn't know if we were going to be boys or girls, but he wanted to have a son named for being courageous in battle.”

“Yes,” Percy lamented, “We’ll see if he was correct. Won’t we, Kenway?”

Kenny shook his head and asked, “What do you mean?”

“You’re a warrior in every sense of the word, and I respect that, Kenway. But...you are filled with flaws and some of them have already been revealed.”

Kenny sneezed and then said, “I appreciate your opinion, Boss, and the jury is still out on me...and you too.”

Percy narrowed his eyes at him. Then he yawned and replied, “That’s my point, Kenway. The jury is forever deliberating about each one of us. In today’s brutal world everybody is expendable if they happen to work for someone else.”

The final words of Percy’s statement hit Kenny in the gut like a speeding cannonball. Percy stared at him. His boss was sizing him up and gauging his reaction.

Kenny wasn’t going to take Percy’s oral whipping anymore. With a shred of sarcasm, he asked, “Does that include you, Boss?”

Percy swung back from glancing at the aquarium with a frozen stare. After a few seconds, Kenny’s throat moistened and he respectfully said, “Boss, my position hasn’t changed from the moment you hired me in Chicago. I will make the tough decisions and live with the outcome. It’s the only way I know how to live.”

“I expect that from you, Kenway.” Percy stood up and shook his hand. “I’m leaving for Paris in the morning, but I took the liberty of handling your dinner reservations for tonight. Heather will drop you off at your hotel. After checking in, you can walk to the best restaurant in Amsterdam if you so desire.”

Percy stretched his arms towards the ceiling. He arched his back and asked, “Are you going to attend the Pope’s ceremony when he visits the San Francisco Bay area?”

Kenny rubbed his face and replied, “I think so. The Papal legacy is amazing, and I’d be honored to see the Pope firsthand. I admire him and respect the Catholic institution. The Vatican is not perfect, but it tries hard and promotes peace on earth.”

“Excellent. Enjoy the opportunity, Kenway. I’ve been to the Vatican several times and met with the Pope twice. It’s well worth it and I highly recommend it. Please let me know what you think of the Pope’s ceremony.” Percy paused and zeroed in on him before stating, “Father Rudy is well within reach of a cardinalship, and I am using every bit of my political influence to try and make that happen. He deserves it, and it would be great for McMillan College. Father Rudy is an important man. Do you follow me, Kenway?”

Kenny picked up his duffel bag and jacket, and replied, “I understand, and thank you, Boss. I sincerely appreciate everything you’ve on my behalf. Have a safe trip to Paris.”

“My pleasure,” Percy said as he walked to the door. His lean face turned towards him and he warned, “Be careful, Kenway. You’re venturing into hazardous waters and creating enemies that will attack you from all angles. Heed my advice and trust only a handful of people. Keep everybody else at bay. Enjoy your evening, Kenway. It should be something you will always remember.”

Chapter 14

Driving the Rolls Royce, Heather dropped Kenny off at the exquisitely built 16th century and five-story tall Hotel Toren near dusk. A half-an-hour later Kenny was resting on the bed in his hotel suite when the telephone rang and startled him awake. Groggy and hungry, he thought about ignoring the call.

Reluctantly, he rolled over and answered the phone. “Hmm...hmm. Hello?”

“Sorry to bother you, Mr. Brown, but I forgot to tell you something.” Heather’s voice came through the receiver and she continued, “When I pointed out the location of your restaurant for dinner this evening, I failed to inform you that Room Service will be delivering fresh fruit, beer and an assortment of cheeses to you at four-thirty. Is that all right with you?”

“I’m starving. Thanks, Heather.” Kenny grumbled.

He hung up the telephone, walked across the hardwood floor and opened the slim Dutch doors to the balcony overlooking the mossy green Amstel Canal. He leaned against the iron railing and casually waved to a boatload of passing tourists taking snapshots of his hotel. Kenny scouted the slender design of the hotel and understood why this particular building had been given the Dutch name of The Tower. Its sleek presence easily sustained its prime location at the apex of the main waterway. The hotel’s steeply pitched roof and smokestack appearance gave it an intimidating, yet romantic appeal.

Kenny sighed with loneliness. He went back inside, stripped off his clothes and stepped into the shower. In order to kick-start his fatigued and frazzled nerves, he alternated the

water temperature between hot and cold. After rinsing off, he exited the shower, grabbed a thick white towel and dabbed at his inner ears.

More relaxed, he walked over to the bed, dropped his towel and nakedly collapsed onto the mattress like he'd been shot in the back by a sniper.

He dazed in and out of sleep and then heard somebody knocking against the door.

A woman's voice announced, "Room Service."

Kenny sat up, draped the towel around his waist and said, "Hold on, I'm coming."

It was probably an intricate combination of many things, a lonely heart, the burden of unrelenting stress and the absence of female companionship that caused him to react as he did.

However, when he pulled the door open and realized that he was not hallucinating, Kenny shouted, "Athena, Holy shit!"

Stunned, he beamed at Athena. She was dressed in a sexy black and white maid's outfit and standing next to a pushcart of fresh goods.

Athena tossed her long hair away from her face, smiled seductively and said, "Hello, handsome!"

Athena moved closer and hugged him, her body flaming with heat.

Kenny's brain went haywire and his overloaded mind barked strict orders. Thank Percy for this great surprise and make love to Athena. Now, now, now!

He reached behind Athena and hoisted her into the air. He kissed her rapidly as if she were going to disappear if he ever let her go. Athena's fingers slipped beneath his towel and she freed it without hesitation. They fell onto the bed and their bodies bounced a few

times from the erotic impact with the mattress. They giggled and feasted on each other like sex-starved lions mating in the Serengeti.

“My God! I missed you so much! I love you, Kenny!” Athena said passionately.

“I love you, too!” Kenny grunted and scooped her up off the bed. He carried Athena across the room. Lustfully, Athena wrapped her legs around him. Kenny pinned her against the wall and tasted all parts of her firm womanly body. He savored the salty flavor of her breasts and thighs and drove into her time and again with strong thrusts. Loudly, they rammed against one of the Dutch doors and it slammed shut with a deafening clap. They murmured unintelligible things and kissed harder. Athena moaned and cried out with pleasure. Pure hedonism overtook Kenny’s entire being and he coaxed Athena to relent time and again until they eventually fell asleep in each other’s arms on the floor and against the Dutch doors.

A few hours later under the fuzzy-yellow street lamps of Rembrandt Square, they walked hand in hand as if they had never been apart. He enjoyed her look of silky black leggings and dark shoes, and her blouse covered by a soft leather jacket. They stopped near the marvelous bronze statue of Rembrandt in the park. Kenny touched one of the bicycles in a rack along the fence and looked at the people milling around the cozy nightspot.

Kenny said, “Athena when I opened the door and saw you standing there, I realized again how much I love you. What a surprise. Wow!”

She squeezed his hands and replied, “As I mentioned earlier. On Friday, two men arrived at my office in Thailand and one of them handed me a phone number. I called Percy at

his office here in Amsterdam and we spoke for ten minutes. Yesterday, I spent seven hours on a beautiful Gulf Stream jet and now I'm here with you. Incredible!"

A few minutes later, the dusty-haired host of Amsterdam's finest Indonesian restaurant, Indrapurna greeted them at the entrance. It was not warm outside but an open table with a large mushroom-shaped overhead heater beckoned them to the veranda. Kenny pulled out a chair for Athena and listened to the musician plucking away at his guitar upstairs.

They sat down and watched people stroll by on the street beside them.

The host introduced himself as Michael and said, "Mister McMillan has taken care of everything. Tonight, I will handle all your needs. I shall return in a moment with your white wine and succulent baby lobster tails."

When Michael was gone, Athena said, "Kenny, please tell me why Percy brought us together tonight."

He looked at her pretty blue-green eyes and began recounting the events of the last few days. Just before he finished, Michael returned with a bottle of Australian Chardonnay and a tray of petite lobster tails simmering in a spicy peanut sauce. The aroma was intoxicating, and he was famished.

When Michael departed, Kenny said, "I need to kill two birds with one shot, Athena, and it's going to be tough."

Athena nodded and replied, "My Dad used to call that a double move."

They toasted and Kenny drank some wine. He sampled the lobster and it was splendid. Later Michael delivered a platter of seasoned poultry, two meat and seafood

dishes that were accompanied by grilled vegetables and bowls of rice. The food was exemplary, somewhat spicy and flawlessly cooked.

They talked and ate, intermittently holding hands and kissing.

Before their dessert arrived, Kenny said, “The situation on my coaching staff is not good at all right now, but at best but they’re all honest guys. I’m not sure what’s going to happen, and I’m confused. To be truthful, I don’t know if I did the right thing or not. Regardless of the issue, it’s my job to do what’s right for the football program, period. As you know, Athena, college football is big business, and I can’t afford to play favorites because I happen to like somebody. I need to do to the right thing, even if it appears to be questionable, Athena, and I’m stuck.”

Athena responded, “Unfortunately, you’re correct, Kenny. The football program must always come first. Otherwise, any crisis has the potential to distract you away from your focus. If that happens, eventually you’ll lose your job.”

“You’re right,” Kenny replied. He picked at his chocolate mousse dessert and listened to Athena’s collection of stories about her challenging work in Thailand. Her eloquent descriptions about gaining valuable new business experience, the Thai people and their unique culture soothed his troubled mind. He finished the last spoonful of his dessert and momentarily forgot about the problems waiting for him in America.

Chapter 15

In California that night, the unfiltered rage bubbling in my increasingly bankrupt soul overpowered my senses. I drove my BMW and gripped the steering wheel like I was trying to strangle it. I directed the automobile northwest towards the Napa Valley and cranked up the volume on the radio trying to calm my nerves by listening to classical music.

At nine o'clock, I had reached the legendary valley's southernmost winemaking region. The slim highway forked like parting lovers and I thought of Phillip. I stayed to the right and veered onto the vineyard-enclosed road of the exclusive Silverado Trail.

Deftly, I drove up the winding asphalt and coasted by the famous wineries of Clos Du Val, Silver Oak, and Duck Horn. My car's headlights flashed onto the burgundy and gold Domain Mumm sign perched on the left. I exhaled with relief and realized I was close to my destination.

I turned onto the little used Highway 128 and wound eastward for ten minutes. I located the steep pebble-strewn driveway I'd been searching for. I banked the car to the right and crept up a small hill. I pulled the car into the broad driveway of the six-bedroom Mediterranean style home overlooking Lake Hennessey. I parked the car and hopped out with an unmatched sense of urgency, even though I had been here many times before.

When I arrived on the portico a blonde adolescent girl opened the door and gleefully exclaimed, "Father Rudy! How wonderful to see you!"

I looked at her strawberry blonde ponytail, smiled and replied, “Hello, Greta. How are you feeling dear young lady?”

She hugged me and gave an extra squeeze to show her appreciation for the prayers I had sent to the Lord when she was gravely ill. After letting go, Greta ushered me inside and yelled, “Hey Papa, Father Rudy’s here!”

I saw the familiar shape of my fat and bald friend emerge from the den. I watched Kirov waddle down the corridor in a dark sweat suit and suede shoes. Kirov moved without grace, balance or agility. I could hear my friend’s heavy footsteps clumping along the terra cotta tile.

Kirov rubbed his potbelly and said, “Rudy, my trusted comrade. How are you?”

Greta helped me wrangle out of my leather jacket and then she scurried off to another room.

I embraced Kirov and we kissed at each other’s cheeks as part of our greeting.

I replied, “Not good, Kirov. Not good at all.”

Kirov stepped back, looked me squarely in the eye and said, “Your life concerns me, Rudy. I got your message late last night. After listening to your voice, I couldn’t go to sleep, and I roused my wife. We’ve been awake since two o’clock this morning.” Kirov shook his head and stated, “My beautiful Petra was livid with me.” He grinned and said, “After breakfast, she called me the bastard son of Stalin, and sped off to her sister’s house and said she would be back sometime tomorrow.”

Ashamed, I looked at the floor and humbly said, “I’m sorry Kirov. I don’t want to create bad feelings between you and your family. Forgive me, please.”

Kirov snorted heartily and replied, “Don’t worry about Petra, she thinks the world of you. I’m the one that drives her crazy.”

Kirov took a few strides across the hallway and reached into a cedar humidor near the doorway. Kirov removed a pair of cigars. He clipped off the tips and swallowed the end caps whole. Kirov grabbed a book of matches and motioned for me to follow. We went out to Kirov’s amazing terrace. I took in the evening view of the lake that reminded me of a Thomas Kincaid painting. The LCD thermometer below the trellis displayed 48 Degrees Fahrenheit.

Kirov dragged over a couple of padded chairs. We sat down and enjoyed the vista. The twinkling lights bordering the boat docks and magnificent homes around the lake shone like hundreds of fireflies hovering near the shoreline.

Kirov seemed worried. My normally jovial friend was mute. I guessed that Kirov was contemplating the dire message from me late last night. I could see it in his eyes.

The pungent smoke from our cigars drifted into the dark sky. Kirov placed his hefty hand onto his kneecap and said, “What can I do for you, my loyal friend?”

I took a draw from my cigar and peered at my friend. Plumes of sweet smoke spilled from my mouth and I replied, “My life is about to turn upside down, Kirov. And it’s become a matter of life and death. That much is a fact.”

Kirov squinted and nodded his smooth head. “Well, my panicked reaction to your message was truly justified, wasn’t it? Does this have something to do with the possibility of you becoming a cardinal?”

I nodded. “Indirectly, yes. And, if this story ever gets out I will never wear one of those divine red hats, nor will I ever be a trusted advisor to the Pope. Forget all of it.”

In detail, I told Kirov about the blackmailing scandal and the intangibles involved. Desperately, I hoped Kirov would concur about the need for swift action. By the time I had smoked half of my cigar I had stopped talking and was listening to my friend.

Kirov responded to my hellish story with a single question, “Do you want me to have this Kenny Brown fellow and that other man killed right away? Now?”

I glanced at the lake and then swung back to Kirov, “Yes, but I did not tell Phillip about my real intentions. It would turn Phillip completely against me, and I’ve lead Phillip away from any type of violent solution because of who I really am, and what has happened. Based on the situation, Kirov, what would you have done?”

Kirov used his spongy left hand to trace the slick incline of his hairless scalp. He flicked some ashes from the tip of his stogie and replied, “You hoodwinked your partner with the oldest trick in the book. Well done and this reminds me of the old days, Rudy. Do you recall how many times my uncle paid you to kill just one person? But sometimes when you arrived at the scene to collect the money, two or three people were forced to die by your hands because they were in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

I did not want to revisit the sewer of my own cordoned off memory lane. My reprehensible past seemed like a different life, despicable, ghastly and ugly, deserving of the gutter. However, Kirov’s words gave me pause and forced me to realize that concrete parallels existed between my life then and now.

I agreed and said, “Yes, Kirov. Unfortunately, Kenway needs to disappear sooner rather than later. I don’t trust him to keep silent about Phillip forever. He has far too much to lose. If Kenway vanishes, and by that, I mean dead and gone, then everything

else should fade away in time. I want it to look like Kenway ran into trouble and just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

Kirov leaned back and remarked, “Making that man vanish will not be simple. He’s noteworthy. We will have to get rid of his body and that’s not easily done.”

I inhaled smoke and asked, “Kirov, how much will it cost me?”

Kirov tapped the nub of his burning cigar onto the iron fence and replied, “Two hundred thousand dollars, and that’s just to cover my costs. As you know, normally it would be twice that much, but I owe you a favor. When do you want it done?”

“I’m not sure I have that much money, so give me a few days to consider some options and I’ll let you know. However, this situation needs relief soon,” I answered. I took a puff and went on, “My head is swimming in preparation for the Pope’s arrival and I desperately need to put this behind me. Any chance of a cardinalship for me would be obliterated by a scandal with my name on it. Surely you must remember how quickly Cardinal Bernard Law of Boston got ousted after his sex scandal? Pitiful.”

Kirov shook his head with disgust and replied. “Absolutely shameful.”

“I agree,” Kirov went on, and then he asked, “Do you remember some of my helpers, Peter, and Yeti and Selina? They came from Moscow a few years after we arrived in New York.”

Much time had passed since I had worked with Kirov’s ruthless gang of criminals. Even though I wanted to forget them I recalled something from long ago and said, “Yeti?” I asked, “Isn’t he that giant of a man that’s afraid of the water?”

Kirov rubbed his hands together, grinned and said, “Yes, he cannot swim. You have an excellent memory and Selina is his beautiful but deadly wife. Both still work for me from time to time. In fact, I used their services on the Fourth of July.”

I bit one of my fingernails and listened to Kirov, “One of the local Vintners in the Sonoma Valley had owed me almost two million dollars for five years and never paid me a cent. Always made excuses. I sent Yeti and Selina after him and the poor bastard repaid the debt with his own life. Selina removed his testicles with a razor wire and corkscrew torture device and Yeti crushed the man’s castrated body in a winepress,” Kirov chuckled and said, “If I’m correct, that Vintner’s blood is fermenting in twelve cases of fabulous red wine. Cabernet, I believe, or it might be a Merlot?”

I wanted to get down to business. I withdrew some newspaper clippings and showed them to Kirov. “Here is a picture of Kenway for your people. Or you can get some new images from the McMillan College website. Is that good enough for them?”

Kirov picked up his smoldering cigar and said, “Yes, my friend. Consider it done. But I’m going to give at least one of these assignments to Peter because it’s only one man that needs to be dealt with right now. Do you remember Peter?”

I pondered Kirov’s question and replied, “Not really. Well, maybe? Is he that fire hydrant of a man with a bald-head and abnormally large ears? Very odd looking.”

“Exactly,” Kirov replied, “Peter has ears like an Elephant, hence his nickname, Floppy.”

I bowed my head as mounds of guilt were heaped upon my decaying soul.

Kirov touched the back of his head and asked, “Rudy, if you become a cardinal, what next? Do you still have dreams of becoming Pope?”

I pictured myself on the throne at the Vatican, dispatching orders, performing religious services in front of millions of people, receiving visitors and greeting dignitaries from around the world. Had worse men than I achieved the Papal throne? I was not sure.

Me, the Pope, I thought. I looked up at Kirov and replied, “If the Pope chooses me as one of his cardinals, only God knows what would happen after that. The Lord knows.”

Kirov nodded and asked, “Rudy, is there anything else you need?”

Racked with angst and a multitude of confusing images spinning in my head, I said, “One last thing, Kirov. Make sure that Kenway disappears forever. His body must never be found. I want Phillip to think that Kenway happened to be the victim of bad timing or he just flat out quit and walked away disgusted with this whole mess.”

Kirov heaved a breath, then wriggled out of his chair and stood up. He responded, “Just like the old days, Rudy. Some things never change.”

A few hours before the stroke of midnight, I was in my car and coasting home on Highway 80. I changed lanes and drifted freely on the barren speedway. I glanced to my right and saw the Golden Gate Fields racetrack. The sprawling grandstands were vacant and gloomy, just like my spirit and soul seemed to be. I visualized a group of well-trained thoroughbreds and their jockeys galloping towards the finish line around the oval racecourse. My wildly bucking thoughts came together like converging drops of mercury linking together in a reunion. I focused on the broadening irony of my own differing existence as an innate killer and as a servant of the Lord. I concluded that somewhere in the horrific basement of my essence there was the remote possibility I somewhat enjoyed making people suffer to repent their sins. Killing another human being apparently pacified the ghastly needs of my fossilized spirit and spoon fed the bubbling vengeance

within me that needed to be maintained. I realized that being a priest was the only way for me to balance my life between superficial goodness and the resident evil rooted within me.

Life is such a gamble, I pondered seriously. I drove onward and drifted across the lanes. I had a strange feeling that I was floating down a cold river towards an unknown and spooky destination. Aimlessly I continued driving and coasting along the freeway, and eventually lost track of time. However, in the back of my mind, I was hoping and praying that the good Lord would deliver me home.

Chapter 16

At dawn, Monday morning rain pummeled the roof shingles of Kenny's home. Sleeping, he was oblivious to the raging conditions outside and his alarm clock was not set to go off for another ten minutes. He slept while a vivid dream about his future as a football coach skimmed through his mind and his spirit attempted to guide him down the yellow brick road of life.

Before his alarm beeped, Touchdown jumped to her feet and growled. His dog barked once and bolted downstairs.

Kenny was jetlagged, having fallen asleep less than two hours ago. He raised his head from the pillow and shouted, "Touchdown, shut up!" Touchdown kept barking. He turned off his alarm clock, put on some sweatpants and walked downstairs. He was shirtless and barefoot.

Touchdown hurried over to him and looked up expectantly. Kenny patted her on the head and asked, "What is it, girl? Why are you going berserk?" She grumbled and snapped at the front door.

Kenny tried to mellow her out. "It's just the rain and thunder. Relax." Just then Kenny heard a weird rumbling sound from beyond his front door. Curious, he opened the entry and was flabbergasted by what he saw. Stuck into his front lawn and protruding from various angles was a bevy of "For Sale" signs.

An icy sensation filled him up as if somebody had substituted the marrow in his bones with liquid nitrogen. "What the f...?" Kenny murmured.

Beyond the plethora of For Sale signs impaled in his yard and parked together on the soaking wet road of Prescott Lane was a caravan of satellite-topped news trucks, broadcast vans and an army of microphone-carrying reporters. Two of the vehicles were rudely positioned on the edge of his grass and they had caused large divots on the green. Kenny stabilized his psyche and clenched his fists.

A sickly-looking man in a bright green slicker was the first person to see him emerge. The drenched reporter pointed at him and yelled above the storm, "There he is!" The skinny guy dropped his coffee cup on the sidewalk and weaved and sloshed through the For-Sale signs.

A chain-reaction of madcap reporters funneled across his front yard like they were trying to get a glimpse of the President. They jammed their saturated bodies onto his porch and elbowed each other out of the way like beggars in a bread line.

Kenny grimaced and stepped back but he didn't shut the door. His dog went nuts at the intrusive herd of humans. Touchdown gnashed at the air like she was squaring off with the Dogcatcher and the golden hair along the ridge of her back bristled. Kenny moved her out of the way and positioned himself on the welcome mat.

A couple of overly aggressive cameramen stuck their instruments too close to his face. Politely but firmly, Kenny pushed the apparatus aside.

Kenny flashed a half-ass smile and sarcastically asked, "Did I win the lottery?" Some of the ambitious reporters laughed but the reed-thin man in the green slicker squirmed closer and asked, "Coach Brown, how does it feel to be the first homosexual football coach in the NCAA to come out of the closet?"

The bright lights mounted on the cameras and numerous flashbulbs popped in front of his face. A sweeping blanket of silence enveloped the moist air and he scanned the faces before him. His pulse quickened and he wanted to punch out the sickly man in the slicker. Partially dressed, he stood on the porch and reflected; Percy tried to warn me about Curtis Waters.

He reorganized his thoughts, glared at the reporter and responded, "Please do me a favor, will you? Next time you talk with Curtis Waters, tell him that my door is always open, and he can stop by anytime, day or night."

The unsightly reporter in the poncho shouted back above the din, "Coach Brown, answer my question! Don't dodge the bullet! Also, who put these For Sale signs in your front yard? Do you think Curtis Waters did this, too?"

Kenny almost slapped the guy in the face. Instead, he responded, "My sexual orientation and that of my staff are none of your business, but thanks for asking. As for the signs in my front yard...I don't know."

The ice had been broken and he began fielding the reporters' insensitive probes like an overwhelmed shortstop trying to play an error-free baseball game. A blonde woman in a blue raincoat got his attention and screamed above the heads of her colleagues, "Coach Brown, have you decided to become a champion for gay rights?"

He contemplated the woman's question and replied, "That's none of your business."

She fired another question at him, "Now that Curtis Waters has joined the staff at Cal; what's your reaction to that news?"

Kenny was surprised that Curtis had been hired so quickly.

He answered her question, "Life is full of surprises. Don't you think?"

A chubby Asian lady in a red winter coat pushed her way to the front and grinned superficially. She stated, “Coach Brown, I’m Sylvia Woo from the Galvanized Press in Dallas. I’d like to know if Percy McMillan has given you an ultimatum?”

“About what?” Kenny asked.

Sylvia moved in and said, “In the last twelve hours, our sources have confirmed that Percy McMillan is receiving tremendous pressure from the Boosters and alumni to dismiss you immediately. Is it true that he wants you and your coaching staff to resign before the National Letter of Intent signing date in early February?”

After a few seconds had elapsed Kenny searched the crowd for any signs of intelligent life. He yearned to have a conversation with one person wanting to report the truth instead of bending it to suit the needs of their editorial bosses.

The man in the green poncho wouldn’t go away and pestered him, “Coach Brown, did you fire Curtis Waters because he disagreed with you about allowing a gay football coach into the men’s locker room?”

A couple of photographers snapped images of him, and he turned away from the flashes. He decided to ignore the jerk in green, but the annoying man got into his face and asked, “Coach Brown, is it true that you’re having an affair with one of your assistant football coaches, and that it’s really you who is gay, along with one of your coaches?”

Throughout his life, he had prided himself on being patient when dealing with ignorant people. Growing up with a fraternal twin brother like Trevor had been both a blessing and a curse. They loved each other but fought like enemies when passions boiled over. This time, however, something busted loose from within and he lost his self-restraint.

Pissed off and overflowing with anger, Kenny grunted loudly and shoved the reporter aside. The unlucky sap tumbled backward across his slippery porch. The disbelieving man careened over the railing, let go of his microphone and it went flying and crashed against one of the For-Sale signs embedded in the front lawn.

“Good God!” Somebody gasped and others followed suit.

The stunned reporter landed in the rose bushes and let out a garbled yowl of agony and screeched with pain.

Kenny glared at a tarp-covered television camera near his face and shouted, “Can you hear me, Curtis Waters? You are the stupidest son-of-a-bitch in the universe and I’m glad you’re gone! I would rather have ten gay coaches on my staff than have to deal with you again! You’re a no good, piece of shit whining excuse for a man!”

The muddy and embarrassed reporter in the poncho scrambled to his feet. His slicker was shredded from his foray into the thorny roses. The flushed man pointed at him and angrily yelled, “Coach Brown, I’m going to file a lawsuit against you, the college and Percy McMillan!”

The overjoyed throng of reporters swung their cameras back to Kenny. He waited in silence while listening to his dog bark incessantly.

Finally, Kenny sneered and replied, “Thanks for the warning, now get off of my property, Asshole!”

Kenny backed towards his front door and noticed Jack Harris from ESPN hustling up the walkway. Harris and his crew whisked by the fellow in the tattered poncho and bounded onto his porch.

The other reporters moved out of the way and Kenny shook hands with Harris. “How’s it going, Jack?”

Harris cleared out some room for himself and his camera crew and replied, “Much better than it is with you it appears, Kenny. I saw your brother at a Special Olympics charity event last night and he seems to be recovering nicely from his shoulder surgery.”

Kenny did not reply and awaited Harris’ first question. Quickly, he glanced across the street and noticed his elderly neighbors. The esteemed Hilliards were standing on their lawn beneath a single umbrella and watching the circus-like events at his house.

Pleasantly, Harris asked, “Kenny, in your opinion, how will this situation affect the McMillan College student body, the alumni and your ability to recruit top-notch athletes from around the country?”

Kenny looked the savvy journalist in the eye and replied, “Good question. It’s going to be a microcosm of the regular world, Jack. Some people won’t give a damn who’s on my staff, but others will scream bloody murder. In terms of recruiting...to be honest with you, we’ll just have to wait and see about that.”

Harris nodded and asked another question, “Kenny, will this damage your football program’s fundraising ability in terms of gathering donations from wealthy alumni?”

Kenny shrugged his bare shoulders and said, “I hope not but I’m not sure. John McDough and Rebecca Jones handle most of that.”

Harris said, “One last question, coach.”

Kenny agreed and Harris asked, “Kenny, when you assembled your coaching staff in the springtime, did you know that one of your assistant coaches was gay?”

Kenny pondered the excellent question and pursed his lips to keep quiet because Harris knew what to ask.

Finally, Kenny replied, “Good question. Thanks for your time, Jack. Have a nice day.”

He shook hands with Harris and then waived across the street at the Hilliards. He admired them and their fifty-six-year marriage. He’d had the pleasure of their company on several occasions and learned that they’d experienced World War II together, raised three kids, owned a vacation home in Tahoe and loved America dearly. The Hilliards waived back at him and then returned to the confines of their home.

Kenny ignored the reporters. He opened the front door and walked back into his house.

“Just one more question, Coach Brown! Wait! Wait!” Somebody shouted in vain.

He slammed the door shut and soothed his dog before striding into the varnished hickory and granite kitchen. He picked up the telephone and thought about calling McDough or Rebecca Jones. Both options seemed negative. McDough was on a ski trip with his wife and Rebecca was back east until tomorrow morning.

Kenny went upstairs to his bedroom and fetched his favorite sweatshirt and weathered moccasins. After tugging the sweatshirt over his head, he looked outside and noticed a cherry-breasted and green-winged bird fly past his deck. He scooted over to the doors in his master bedroom and quietly pulled them open. He peered over the railing of his deck and scouted the trees in his backyard.

Kenny heard the familiar squawking and chirping sounds and quickly located a half-dozen Amazon Parrots perched on the limbs of an oak tree. He watched the flock of

birds preen their feathers and it made him feel good. For a millisecond it was the only thing that really mattered.

Chapter 17

Under misty darkness just after two o'clock in the morning on Tuesday, a short, stocky, bald man with incredibly large and misshaped ears walked down the shop-lined street of Piedmont Ave. in Oakland, California.

Floppy tucked his lethal hands into the pockets of his raincoat and avoided eye contact with the after-hours' stragglers he encountered en route to his destination. Floppy jaywalked and moved to the other side of the quiet avenue. He glanced to his left at the world-famous Fenton's Ice Creamery and imagined it packed with customers stuffing their maws with sweets only hours ago. Floppy increased the pace and cruised by the Piedmont Theater without peeking at its antiquated box office. A pair of teenage lovers were kissing and groping beside the movie house and they failed to notice him moving through the crosswalk. He walked for another few minutes and turned left on 41st.

Floppy wiped the dew from his hairless scalp and flicked the moisture away from his enormous ears. Floppy extracted a pair of leather gloves from his pocket and put them on while moving down the darkened sidewalk. Floppy made a left turn into an alley between a pair of large apartment complexes and spotted his landmark. Floppy bent down and pretended to tie his shoes while scouting the area for possible trouble. He stood up and refocused on the one-bedroom cottage at the end of the alley and was relieved to see the porch light off. Only a faint glow from the streetlamp on the corner behind him cast any light on the cottage.

Floppy shuffled right hung close to the apartment wall and skirted down the pavement towards the dim yellow and white dwelling. He stopped at the end of the complex and looked up to see if anyone from either apartment complex happened to be interested in the current events of the alley. Not a soul to be found lurking from above.

Mentally, Floppy blocked out his surroundings and walked up to the shadowy porch of the cottage. He wrapped on the front door five times and took a step back. He waited for ten seconds and repeated his efforts until a light went on in the home.

“Who’s there?” A man’s voice came from behind the front door, obviously agitated and cautious.

The porch light flicked on, and Floppy answered, “My name’s Peter, and I’m one of your neighbors from the apartments next door.”

“What do you want?” The man asked angrily.

“My five-year-old girl has gone missing tonight. So, the police and I are handing out pictures of her to everybody in the area. This will only take a minute, sir. Please, I could really use your help,” Floppy lied.

The door cracked open and a redheaded man with a freckled face squinted at him and replied, “I’m very sorry to hear that. What’s your daughter’s name?”

“Tootsie,” Floppy said, “Sounds corny but it’s true.”

Floppy produced a generic picture of a small girl and showed it to the man at the door. He stuck out his right hand and offered, “Hi, I’m Peter. And your name is?”

The man countered, “Sorry, but I don’t recognize your daughter. Then again, I just moved here because I’m getting a divorce from my bitch of an ex-wife.”

The door opened all the way. The man finally shook his hand and replied, “My name is Curtis Waters.”

In a flash, Floppy pushed the photograph closer to Curtis’ face without releasing his handshake. As a distraction Floppy let go of the photo and it fluttered into the entry of the cottage and onto the hardwood floor. He let go of Curtis’ hand as the unsuspecting man bent down to retrieve the picture. Expertly, Floppy placed the palm heels of his hands on the back of Curtis’ head and pushed down forcefully. Unrelenting, he delivered a crushing right knee to the doomed man’s temple and heard a sickening crunch.

His victim rocked backward and went spilling to the side while clutching his injured head. Groggy and stunned but panicked, Curtis exclaimed, “Oww...what are you doing to me?”

Floppy answered in a hollow voice, “Payback!”

Floppy shut the door and went to work on Curtis with a savage fury. He pounded him with an avalanche of wicked hooks, uppercuts and hammer fists using his gloved hands. Curtis tried to rise but fell back onto his knees, his face mashed, cut and bloodied. Floppy’s knuckles began to swell and ache from the merciless ass kicking he was serving up, but the familiar pain only caused him to pour it on, and he pummeled his victim in a blind rage.

Valiantly, Curtis took a couple of swipes at him, but they were listless and futile.

Floppy stepped forward and kicked him in the mouth with all his might. Curtis sailed in the air, landed on his side and rolled onto his stomach unconscious in the entryway. He knelt onto Curtis’ upper back and put the sleeping man into a vice-like headlock. He increased the pressure and torque, and then violently twisted the man’s

neck. A quartet of gruesome popping sounds creaked from the man's splintered vertebrae and echoed in the entry. His neck was broken, and the deadly deed was done.

Floppy dropped the deceased man from his grasp and quickly moved through the petite house. He pocketed Curtis' wristwatch, two rings, his wallet, and a few valuables to make things appear like a burglary gone awry. He knocked over a lamp and broke a small end table for good measure. He turned off the hall light and the porch light. Quietly, he exited the gloomy cottage, closed the front door and moved down the damp alley without looking back.

Chapter 18

After eating a small breakfast on campus Tuesday morning, Kenny calmed his nerves and mentally prepared himself for an intense meeting with his peers. Although a small segment of the McMillan College student body had already disbanded and scattered across the country to enjoy their Christmas vacation, Kenny sensed some of the coeds staring at him as he walked across the saturated grounds of the college.

The rain had ceased momentarily, and he was feeling overheated. He unzipped his silver and black jacket and moved towards the reclusive faculty room in the circular building of Adams Hall.

Kenny stepped through some mud puddles and strode across the murky Republican Road. A few minutes later he yanked open the southern doors of the building, removed his coat and breezed into room # 196.

The wedge-shaped amphitheater was overflowing with the institutions' highly regarded professors, administrators, and coaches. He entered with his head up and ready to defend his controversial position. He saw Rebecca Jones, John McDough, Father Rudy and another dark-haired man stationed behind a long wooden table. The overhead lighting seemed far too bright; everyone's face was grotesquely blanched and looked as if they could audition for a flesh-eating role in, *Night of the Living Dead*.

Upon entering the room Kenny noticed that his peers had stopped talking and focused their attention on him. He responded with a casual hello, placed his jacket onto the back of his seat and sat down in the sole remaining chair in the corner of the front row. He

brushed some flecks of dandruff away from his jet-black sweater and got comfortable, estimating there were about 250 people in the room.

Kenny watched Rebecca Jones sip at her glass of water and look at the serious man next to her. He saw the man acknowledge the President's gaze with a slight nod and Rebecca stood up. She adjusted her Palomino blouse and said, "Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for coming on such short notice. Before I forget, please remind your remaining students about the special meeting at the American Auditorium tomorrow night. It's important that we recognize their voice regarding this matter, and it's vital we tell them how we're going to handle this."

As he wrestled with his own thoughts, Kenny sat up and listened to the President speak her mind about the sensitive nature of this issue and the importance of handling it correctly. While Rebecca was drawing in a much-needed breath, he heard one of his colleague's pipe-up from behind. "Don't beat up any more reporters, Coach Brown!"

A few people laughed at the crass remark but not many. Rebecca shot the heckler an icy stare. Kenny recognized the man's voice, but he decided to ignore it. After a menacing pause, Rebecca turned the meeting over to John McDough.

As was his customary fashion when uptight, McDough snapped his fingers a few times and loosened his necktie. Kenny watched him scan the room and then McDough said, "It's time to cut the crap, people. We need to look at his damn situation for what it really is!"

Kenny thought. That got their attention. Good job, McDough.

He watched McDough and noticed his friend had large sweat stains underneath each armpit seeping through his shirt.

Strongly, McDough said, “Coach Brown and the rest of his staff are in a very difficult situation. If anybody doubts the validity of that statement, then speak up now or shut your mouth forever. This is a private meeting, and you can say whatever you want without fear of retribution. Be honest, and you will not be punished. That comes straight from the mouth of Percy McMillan.”

Kenny looked at Father Rudy and in his white priest’s collar. The relaxed priest met his gaze and tilted his head in return. Kenny did likewise and looked at the stranger at the far end of the table. He examined the middle-aged man’s professional appearance and closely cropped brown hair. He tried to figure out who the man was and why he was at the meeting. Was he a lawyer, arbitrator or Percy McMillan’s surrogate eyes and ears?

Kenny heard the heckler speak up again, “I’d like to say something.”

Each person in the room turned to face the man in the canary shirt. Kenny watched the college’s Track and Field Coach sit up, peck his gorgeous girlfriend on the cheek and say, “I’ve been a track coach for fifteen years, and I totally disagree with Kenny’s decision. With all due respect, Kenny, I think you’ve made a serious mistake that could damage our athletic department’s ability to function properly for years to come.”

People mumbled and Kenny thought about the huge riff between himself and the track coach, Jerry Luxedo. Jerry hated his guts because the man’s lovely fiancée had overtly propositioned him at a faculty party, even though he had politely rebuffed the inebriated woman and escorted her back to Jerry.

Kenny gazed at Jerry and said, “Go ahead, Jerry, finish your thoughts out loud.”

Jerry gave a curt nod and continued, “We’re in the business of teaching young people how to become better students and athletes. We’re influential people because our beliefs and ideologies can be transferred to pupils through a variety of methods, including hands-on applications. However, we are not in the business of openly flaunting or offering up our sexual orientation or displaying it for the public to see. It’s our job to never, ever let our sexual ways intrude upon our ability to teach or interact with students. Ever!”

Many people in the room tittered. After a few seconds, McDough asked for silence and then looked to Kenny. “Coach Brown, would you like to respond to what Jerry said?”

Trying to relax, Kenny folded his hands in his lap and inclined his head at McDough. He glanced at Father Rudy and noticed his eyes were riveted on him. Kenny turned his head to the left and looked at the blonde-haired track coach. “I agree with you, Jerry. And that’s why I decided not to fire my assistant football coach. In fact, whomever he sleeps with is none of our business. So, in fact, I’m attempting to do the right thing.”

Jerry craned his neck to get a clearer look at him. “Kenny, do you honestly think you’re doing the right thing by supporting your gay coach? Or, are you afraid to fire him because you fear a lawsuit, and/or you would have a guilty conscious? How do you think the parents and families of our current and future student-athletes are going to respond to something like this? Are you nuts or just in complete and utter denial? Which one is it?”

Kenny knew Jerry was trying to bait him into a nasty argument. He took a few deep breaths, glanced at Rebecca Jones and again at McDough. His old friend winked and gave him the green light.

Kenny swung back to Jerry and replied, “When dealing with the parents and families, I’m going, to tell the truth and hope for the best. In response to your other question about me feeling guilty...no, I wouldn’t feel bad if I fired somebody because they were a bad coach. But, I would feel absolutely terrible if I canned somebody for the wrong reason.”

His coworkers chatted nervously, and Jerry blurted, “Ha! Get real, Kenny! If you don’t abandon your suicidal position on this issue, then our football program is going to wither and die on the vine. Open your eyes and cut the guy loose, knucklehead!”

Kenny felt the skin on his face flushing. Brazenly, he snapped back, “Jerry, even though you’ve never led our esteemed track program to anything higher than a fourth-place finish in your entire career, I respect your opinion. However, if you ever speak to me like that again, then you and I are going to wrangle.”

Nearly everybody in the room sat forward in anticipation of Jerry’s reply. Instead, Jerry seemed to be flustered, was jabbering and eventually said nothing. Rebecca stood up and was about to speak when Kenny heard a woman’s voice from atop the back row. “Way to go, Kenny!”

The President pointed to Barbara Yazzetti and he spotted the sultry brunette. She was wearing a form-fitting beige wool dress and a thick gold necklace.

Barbara rose up, put her hands on her hips and lamented, “It’s a strange world we live in, and I can’t define what the word normal means anymore. Look around, human beings are interacting with computers in an unprecedented way, and most of us know where that’s going to lead. It’s terrifying. Someday soon humans will be having sex with

robots instead of hot-blooded human bodies. We need to accept people for what they are, regardless of their sexual ways.”

Even though Kenny enjoyed looking at the stunning woman, he closed his eyes and sat back while she spoke. He was pleased that some people in the room seemed to be siding with him and Barbara was one of them. He had always gotten along well with her and had even set her up on a date with one of his assistant football coaches, Keith Greene. The Sunday afternoon following their wild night together, Keith had shown up on his doorstep with a nasty hangover, a six-pack of Coors and had recounted the details of their lusty escapades with no strings attached.

When Barbara finished talking, Rebecca retook control of the meeting.

Kenny saw her glance at the priest, and she said, “Attention, please. Father Rudy has something to say.”

Everybody looked at the most influential man on campus. Kenny realized Father Rudy was staring at him again, but the priest’s expression had gone from pleasant to vacuous. He felt uncomfortable and shifted his eyes away from the well-respected theologian.

Father Rudy spoke in a deliberate tone, slow and steady. “For the past few hours, I’ve been alone in my chambers consulting with the Lord about this troublesome situation. As you know, our sacred Bible does not allow for a great deal of flexibility regarding sex, especially when it comes to the ways of homosexuality.”

Kenny wriggled in his seat and accepted that he was a tad uncomfortable listening to Father Rudy talk about this issue. He respected the priest and didn’t want to venture past

the point of no return with the powerful man on this issue. His problem as the head football coach of the college had quickly become a primary concern for the faculty.

Father Rudy continued. "For the time being, I believe it's important for the church to steer clear of this predicament. However, I cannot and will not condone the forbidden acts of homosexuality. If our students are not affected negatively, then we should let the Lord decide what is right or wrong. We should trust his judgment and move forward."

The room erupted with differing opinions. Kenny scanned the room and watched his peers engaged in various forms of debate. Some were pointing fingers at each other and many were shaking their heads in disagreement or nodding.

He looked at Father Rudy and felt sorry for him, realizing the priest was also caught in a difficult spot. He knew that Father Rudy could easily jeopardize his popularity by alienating one segment of the college's population or another.

Rebecca called the meeting to order. "Be quiet, please. Ladies and gentlemen, I would like to announce that we have the Vice President of the NCAA here with us today. Please stop your discussions and welcome, Hank Beach."

While applauding casually with everybody else Kenny mumbled to himself. "I hope that I don't get fired after this meeting."

Hank Beach rose beside the table and walked to the center of the room dressed in a gray suit and golden necktie.

Mr. Beach said, "Well, well, well. The world of collegiate athletics never gets dull, does it?"

Kenny mused at the man's levity, and Mr. Beach continued, "Seriously folks, we're covering new ground here, and I sincerely want you to understand something about

our wonderful organization. The NCAA strives to support each person involved in intercollegiate athletics. And although we've never actually dealt with this type of situation before, rest assured that we'll find a workable solution. To be blunt, twenty-five years ago, who would have guessed female reporters' would have ever been allowed into men's locker rooms?"

Jerry Luxedo tried to say something, but Mr. Beach held up his hand and said, "Please, let me finish."

Kenny pulled at his lower lip and looked at McDough, Rebecca and Father Rudy. Hank Beach from the NCAA was doing a fabulous job of easing the tensions in the room while maintaining a higher authority, and Kenny respected him for it. He could see why the man had risen to such a lofty position within the framework of the NCAA hierarchy.

Mr. Beach went on, "We have scoured every article and bylaw of the NCAA's code of conduct and ethics of teaching and professionalism. Nowhere, does it mention or even insinuate that Coach Brown must reveal the name of his assistant coach in question? There is no precedent for this type of situation, zip, zilch, nothing. In fact, this scenario is the genesis, and the byproduct will come to light as we progress. Thank you very much for your time, and on behalf of the NCAA, we appreciate each of you and your diverse opinions."

After Mr. Beach had finished, Rebecca asked Kenny, "Coach Brown, do you have anything else you'd like to say?"

Kenny shook his head and replied, "No thanks, I'll save it for tomorrow night."

Moments later, after saying goodbye to his superiors, Father Rudy and Mr. Beach, Kenny walked outside and into the rain minutes before eleven o'clock. He zipped up his jacket, pulled on his hood and took the long route back to his office.

He walked by the western annex of the church and bumped into one of his most reliable assistant coaches. Kenny greeted him and asked, "Hey, Eddie. How's it going?"

Eddie Banks had a pensive look on his normally happy smooth black face. He had three videotapes and some recruiting folders tucked beneath his tan overcoat. He gave a slight smile at him and replied, "Not bad, Kenny. But shouldn't I be asking you that same question?"

Kenny decided to change the subject. "Why? Are there any recruits on those videotapes that can help us out this season?"

Eddie raised his eyebrows and quietly said, "One, but the other two won't be able to cut the mustard at our level."

Kenny understood. "Good work, Eddie, but what's wrong?" Then he asked, "Hey man, are we still going Steelhead fishing at your family's ranch this weekend on the Klamath River? Cause I could really use a break."

Eddie touched him on the shoulder and answered, "Yes, I wouldn't miss it for the world. And it's too bad the other coaches can't go with us, but there's always next time. I talked with my dad last night and he said everything is in good shape up there because the ranch hand fixed everything before going back to Texas last week."

Kenny inhaled some crisp air and asked, "Do I need to bring anything special?"

Eddie shook his head and replied, "Nope. Only my parents have been up there since Father Rudy used the cabin in November. It's fully stocked and ready to go."

Kenny patted Eddie on the arm. “Sounds good, thanks.” Kenny examined Eddie’s worried face and again asked, “Eddie, what’s the matter? You seem upset.”

They stood face to face in the light rain for nearly a minute, Eddie’s eyes began to water, and he finally said, “Curtis Waters was killed last night, and the police are waiting for you at the football office.”

The invisible sledgehammer from God that smashed upon Kenny’s head instantly flattened his spirit, soul, and ego into a wafer-thin wasteland of nothingness.

“What?” Kenny coughed up.

Frowning, Eddie nodded and answered, “The cops have already talked to most of us about our alibis for last night, and now they’re waiting for you. Sorry, Kenny. I didn’t want to be the guy telling you the bad news.”

Kenny shook his head, spat and responded, “I know, and it’s not your fault.”

They headed off in opposite directions. Kenny stopped in front of Centennial Dorm # 3 after realizing a few of the students were shouting at him from above.

He looked at one of the half-dressed young ladies leaning out of a fifth-story window and she yelled down to him, “Hey, Coach Brown! Keep up the good work, and by this time next year our football players will be wearing mini-skirts like me!”

A chorus of laughter spilled from the raucous dorm room and the young woman’s verbal barb hit him across the face like a white-gloved British backhand.

Already peeved, alarmed and with his mind churning with doubt, Kenny refrained from countering the coed’s statement with some biting words of his own. He took five long strides across the mushy lawn towards his office and prepared himself for the worst.

Chapter 19

That night I emerged from the main exit of the church and walked into the brilliantly clear and cool night. I looked up at the black sky and was momentarily dazzled by the glittering stars twinkling above. I felt invincible, powerful and more alive than I'd been in a decade as if God was releasing more essence of pure divinity into my veins.

I walked straight ahead and observed a mob of people hustling towards the massive complex of the American Auditorium. I glanced down at my bright red robe and checked the blue and white trim encircling each one of my cufflinks and neckline. Several people greeted me, and I returned their cordiality but never broke stride. I noticed a horde of media personnel milling outside in the brisk night air, but I already knew that Rebecca Jones would never allow the mainstream media into the college's privately sanctioned meeting for the students. I would be secure inside the auditorium.

Two eager reporters chased after me and I entered the auditorium as if they didn't exist. I walked in and fondly recalled the last time I'd been inside the glorious, 8,000 seat capacity arena two weeks ago. I had thoroughly enjoyed a marvelous production of William Shakespeare's classic, *All's Well That Ends Well*.

I moved through the breezy cement corridors of the arena and heard the buzzing energy assault my senses. A tremor-like ambiance vibrated through the soles of my feet, filtered through my skin and settled in my robe. I bounded backstage and was thankful that the main curtain had not yet been drawn back.

I spotted many of my own colleagues and Coach Brown's assistant football coaches taking their seats in the rank and file metal chairs along the outer two-thirds of the elevated stage. I nodded at Phillip, but painfully he looked away from me. Wishing not to be distracted I took a left turn and scooted into the bathroom backstage. After urgently relieving myself of adrenaline-laced urine and washing my hands, I splashed some cold water onto my face and hair.

With beads of water dripping from my face I investigated the mirror and was shocked to see a haggard-looking Coach Kenny Brown standing behind me, stoic. My guts churned as if boiling in a vat of stew, my heart altered its beat and I was speechless.

Seemingly exhausted and in an apologetic tone, Coach Brown said, "I'm sorry if I startled you, Father Rudy. But when I saw you come in here, I realized that I needed to talk to you now. I don't know where to turn and I need your support."

I ensured that nobody else was in the blue-tiled restroom with us and then I asked, "What can I do for you, Kenway?" Support was the last thing I would offer him.

Kenny stared back at me pensively. He looked awful, truly not right.

I stood eyeball to eyeball with Kenny. The normally uniquely handsome football coach was clearly worn out and had purplish crescents of beleaguered skin underneath his tired green eyes. However, I approved of his navy-blue suit, off-white shirt, and maroon necktie. Truth be told, I had always been a fan of the conservative and classy look, even though my preferred tastes ran more to the fashionable side of things.

I watched, as Kenny ran his hands through his thick sandy-colored hair.

Finally, Kenny stated, "I'm deeply troubled by the negative effects my decision has cast upon you, Father Rudy. When I made the choice of not firing my assistant coach,

I had no idea it would impact you and put you in the middle of this outlandish controversy. This morning when I read the newspaper, I was stunned to see your picture on the front page of USA Today. I can't believe Jerry Luxedo deliberately misquoted you. He's an asshole, and I'm sorry about the grief I've caused you. If anything, I've done ruins your chances of becoming a cardinal...I would never forgive myself. Never!"

I waited while the various images of murdering Kenny were swept away by the Lord's vast broom of limitless forgiveness. I pushed back my dark hair and coolly replied, "Never in a million years did I expect to see my face on the front page of USA Today. It was shocking, to say the least. However, I'm aware you had nothing to do with it and I accept your apology regarding that issue."

"Thank you, Father Rudy," Kenny responded with a sigh.

Even though I didn't want to reveal the true nature of my position, I couldn't resist something and asked, "Kenway, I heard the terrible news about Curtis Waters, and I want you to know that my prayers go out to his loved ones. Terrible indeed."

Slowly, Kenny shook his head and said, "I feel horrible about what happened to him, just awful. And do you know what else?" Kenny gazed at me for a second with a beleaguered look and finished, "I have this creepy, uneasy feeling that somebody wants to kill me. Call it a hunch or intuition, but that's how I feel. Weird, don't you think?"

How right you are, Kenway. I should not have underestimated your abilities to survive. Then, I cleared my mind of evil thoughts and put forth a question, "Why do you think somebody wants you dead?"

Kenny shrugged his shoulders and answered, "Gut feeling mostly."

I nodded and replied, “Hmm. If you don’t mind me asking, Kenway, how did your meeting with the police go this morning? Have they finished questioning your coaches? How goes the case?”

Kenny exhaled and replied, “It was a crappy experience, that’s for sure.”

I took a gentle step back and thought. Don’t thank God or evoke his name in that regard. I know you didn’t start this whole mess, Kenway, but you’ve made things much worse, and now you must pay the price. Such is the way things must be. How dare you!

I peered into Kenny’s eyes and forced myself to calmly suggest something. “If you would like to come to confession, my door is always open for you, Kenway. Anytime you need somebody to talk to, just drop by.”

I watched Kenny step over to the sink, ease his hands under the automated faucet and gulp some water. After he was done, Kenny said, “Thank you, Father Rudy. I have never been to confession before, but I might need to do it someday. We’ll see?”

Resolutely, I asked, “Is there anything else I can do for you, Kenway?”

Pensively, Kenny responded, “Yes, please support me when I’m on stage tonight. I would really appreciate it. And of course, I will do the same for you.”

I wanted to wrap my hands around Kenway’s neck and crush the life out of him until his eyes popped from his skull, but instead, I answered, “I will, and I look forward to hearing your speech tonight. From what I understand, I am to be last on the list of speakers tonight. Hopefully, there might still be a handful of people in the seats when it’s my turn to talk to the students.”

Kenny smirked at me, shook my hand and walked towards the door. “Are you kidding me, Father Rudy? Most of the people here tonight would rather listen to you than anybody else on campus. Thanks again, and good luck.”

After Kenny exited the restroom, I pretended like I was stabbing him between the shoulder blades with my trusty dagger to release my rage. I cut whistling swaths through the musky air with my dangerous hands as if I was mutilating Kenny’s body. After gathering my scattered wits and letting go of my hot-blooded turmoil, I rediscovered God’s strength. I stood before the full-length mirror on the wall and practiced the opening lines of my forthcoming speech. “It’s an honor to be with you tonight my beloved McMillan College students. As many of you know, I’ve traveled the world and studied Catholicism, Judaism, Buddhism and many ancient religions from various walks of life...”

Chapter 20

At dusk on Thursday, I emerged from the library and hustled towards my chambers. The grayish sky was filling with ominous clouds and the breathtaking sunset was like a spectacular painting replete with violet, pink and silver. A nasty wind slapped me in the face, and I noticed a taper of light bursting through a hole in the rolling thunderheads. God was inspecting life on earth with his all-seeing beam of light.

I sneezed two times and tugged at the collar of my sports jacket. The beautiful grounds of the college were deserted because the annual winter break had begun. I felt like I was walking through a ghost town, except I knew the Lord was with me because my plans seemed to be coming together despite the threats from outside forces.

Ten minutes later I arrived at the church, unlocked the side door and pivoted into my chambers unimpeded. It took me a few minutes to change into my white gown and lavender scarf before walking into the main foyer of the church. I saw a few of my loyal attendees kneeling in the pews and noticed Eddie Banks entering through the main doors.

We walked towards each other down the center aisle and I extended my hand to one of my persistent churchgoers. “It’s good to see you, Eddie. I’m pleased that you’re here because the house of the Lord seems empty when the students are away on Christmas break.”

Eddie fumbled with his gray shoulder pack before slinging it over his jacket. I observed the smooth contours of Eddie's shaved black head and then Eddie replied, "You know me, Father Rudy...I feel more complete after I've been to church."

I grinned and said, "Yes, Eddie. All of us do. Besides, you're one of the Lord's most dedicated servants."

"I appreciate that, Father Rudy," Eddie said, "And, I loved your speech at the auditorium the other night. It lifted my spirits and moved me to tears."

"Excellent." I replied and then I asked, "Tell me, Eddie, do you have any plans for the holidays?"

Eddie flashed me a smile and replied, "Yes, I do, thank God. Although I thought things were going to be canceled because of the Curtis Waters incident; thankfully the police have pretty much cleared the staff as potential suspects in his death. They believe it might have been a bungled robbery gone awry. Tomorrow morning, Coach Brown and I are driving up to my family's ranch on the Klamath to do some Steelhead fishing."

I said, "Ah, the Klamath River, one of the most glorious places on earth."

Eddie stepped aside as another person walked into the church, then replied, "It's been snowing up there, so it should be nice. Hopefully, the fishing will be superb."

I touched Eddie on the forearm and quietly said, "Sounds like a wonderful time, and remember that Jesus was a noteworthy fisherman himself."

Eddie patted his sports bag and said, "He sure was."

I smiled but said nothing as two more people stepped into the church.

Eddie tapped his forehead and exclaimed, "I forgot the other videos at the office! Please excuse me, Father Rudy, I've got to go back and pick them up."

I reached into the pocket of my robe and removed one of my complimentary, glittering crucifixes. I looked into Eddie's brown eyes and said, "Take this with you, my friend, and may it keep you safe on your journey with Coach Brown."

Eddie accepted the tiny gift and kissed it once before tucking it into his pants pocket. "What a beautiful Cross, thank you very much, Father Rudy. I'll keep it with me all weekend."

Almost twenty minutes later, I was working at my desk when somebody furiously pounded on the side door that led to the remote open-air causeway behind the church. Disturbed, I stood up and walked towards the private entry to my office. The nerve-racking hammering on the door recommenced and I impatiently snapped, "Hold on, please...I'm coming."

Unsure, I pushed the door open and gazed into the tranquil evening. I looked to the right and noticed Phillip's Cadillac parked on the pebble-strewn lot across the way. Shocked, the hair on the back of my neck jumped to attention. I attempted to shut the door, but my lover's massive hands gripped it from the other side. Grunting quietly, we battled each other in a macabre tug of war until Phillip won, and yanked the door wide open. Phillip glowered at me like a madman with a heaving chest and breathing deeply.

In a hushed tone, I asked, "What are you doing here, Phillip?"

My estranged partner stepped closer and hotly replied, "I love you, Rudy, and I'm tired of being alone. Aren't you sick of this crap?"

I looked at Phillip's thick hair, chiseled face and superb body. Phillip was dressed in black jeans, a sweater, and cowboy boots. Suddenly, I recalculated the depths of my own terrible solitude and realized I was extremely lonely as well. Like a nervous rat, I

glanced around and noticed Eddie Banks' tarp-covered Suzuki motorcycle parked beneath a tree in a very secluded part of the backside causeway. Eddie had been parking his motorcycle along this back road since I'd known him.

"Yes, Phillip." I replied, "I'm lonely, but we need to keep a low profile and do the right thing in order for our relationship to survive."

"What relationship are you talking about?" Phillip replied, and attempted to come inside but I stepped in front of him. Phillip glared at me, jabbed his index finger at me and kept talking, "We never see each other Rudy. Never! We don't talk to each other on the telephone, unless I call you from a payphone, or even send emails back and forth for fear of getting caught. Get real, Rudy! If we continue like this for this much longer, we're finished! Is that what you want? Do you want our relationship to be over?"

Flustered, and with my temples thumping, I looked into Phillip's eyes and replied, "Of course not, I want to be with you but now is not the time for us to be greedy. We need to be smart, not lustful and stupid my love."

Phillip narrowed his eyes at me and hissed, "Who do you think you're fooling, Rudy? I've exposed myself for you...for us! My life with my children is at stake if we mess things up! Don't you think I know that? I have just as much to lose as you do!"

I nodded but said nothing as I tried to think of the best option to be rid of Phillip until we could talk in peace to work things out the way I needed them to be right now.

Phillip moved away from the door and pointed to the Cadillac. "Rudy, if you're not out here in five minutes, then I will keep pounding on your door until the end of time. I promise!"

I held up my hand and retorted, “Okay, give me thirty seconds.” I shut the door and scooted back to my desk before closing and locking the interior door leading to the church. I walked outside with my keys in hand, looked around to make sure nobody else was around and greeted Phillip with a warm handshake, fearful of public display. I closed my eyes and dreamed of the day we could be together unafraid, laughing and kissing.

Phillip asked, “Can we get together tonight at our secret spot near the Golden Gate Bridge? Nobody will ever find us there.”

I breathed deeply a few times and said, “Maybe, Phillip. Let me call you at home this evening. Okay?”

Phillip nodded and I could feel primal urges to caress him rising within me.

Quietly, Phillip asked, “Rudy, where were you when Curtis Waters was killed?”

My gut instinct had been correct. Phillip wanted more answers from me. I had planned my story to perfection and answered truthfully, “Counseling the Rigoninni’s about their son’s death. They needed my help and I was with them for many hours that night.”

“I’m glad it wasn’t you that killed him. Very glad indeed.” Phillip responded.

Feeling pleased I let my guard down for a flicker of time and thanked God for his understanding. I surveyed the area again to be sure we were alone, and then I hugged Phillip tightly while standing with him on the quiet back road behind the church. His chin felt wonderful resting on my left shoulder, his body warm, inviting and strong.

Less than a minute passed. I opened my eyes and received the most brutal and disheartening shock of my adult life, I felt as if I were made of stone. God had let me down again. I wanted to scream until my lungs burst, hoping to wake myself from the

sadistic nightmare that must have been produced by the devil himself. I gawked in horror as Eddie Banks stared at us with an utter surprise showing on his unblinking ebony face. Not wanting Phillip to realize what was happening, I embraced Phillip with all my might. For one full second that seemed like an eternity, I looked into the confused and bottomless eyes of Eddie.

Demurely but overflowing with panic, I turned away and casually guided Phillip to his car. Finally, after Phillip had driven away in the opposite direction, I spun around and searched for Eddie, hoping to formulate a reasonable answer that the disbelieving man would somehow process, understand and accept without telling anybody what he had seen.

Totally depressed and with ebbs of acidic bile rising in my throat, I realized Eddie was already gone after quietly pushing his motorcycle to another location before starting it up and driving away. In a flashback that encompassed my tumultuous past, I felt my blood chilling and my heart turning into something like petrified wood. Again, I morphed into the cold-blooded murderer I used to be and completely understood that I was shedding my holy skin for the last time. For several moments, I questioned if the great Lord had deserted me in my most desperate time of need.

I bolstered my resolve and the recognizable sensation of the flaming hot, evil and demonic part of my soul was resurrecting. Sadly, and with the crushing guilt seemingly pressing me into the molten bowels of the earth, I came to the stark realization about what I must do to survive.

Chapter 21

Early Sunday morning, Kenny woke up in bed and smelled the wonderful aroma of fresh coffee brewing, along with bacon and eggs cooking in the oak and copper kitchen of Eddie's cabin along the Klamath River. He knew it was damn cold outside and realized he would need to wear his blue thermals once again.

Kenny looked up at the wood beamed ceiling and noticed a furry spider rappelling down towards his face. He watched the fearless critter descend to within a foot of his nose and then stuck out his right hand, allowing the tiny creature the opportunity to settle onto his palm. The bold spider remained motionless on his flesh and the arachnid studied its options warily. He curled his fingers and lazily tossed the spider to the far side of the room so it could find a new home.

He pulled on his long johns, shuffled over to the frosty window in his bedroom and cranked it open. A breeze of frigid air rushed into the cabin and his breath appeared in front of his face. He leaned out of the window and scanned the snow-covered grounds of the Klamath River ranch on the flat mesa above the inlet. It felt great to be far away from home in the wintry landscape of the Klamath National Forest. He peered at the steep mountains blanketed with alder trees and sugar pines. He looked at the treetops and watched a majestic bald eagle launch itself into the cold air. The large bird glided through the dawn sky and scouted the sage river for a fresh Steelhead trout breakfast or wayward critter.

Kenny walked into the kitchen and was greeted by the smiling face of Eddie Banks. Eddie said, “Morning, Kenny. Grab some coffee and get ready to eat an awesome meal.”

He said hello and poured himself a mug of steaming brew. He watched his friend navigate in the kitchen in his banana-colored thermals and then he sat down on a chair in the nook.

Eddie walked over to the table and put down a platter of food in front of him. “Dig in, Kenny, and let’s get ready to fish.”

Kenny didn’t hesitate and said, “Thanks, Eddie, it looks great.”

Eddie turned off the stove and joined him at the table. Eddie replied, “My pleasure, especially since you did such a good job of cooking dinner last night. That might have been the best fish I’ve ever had.”

Kenny grinned and they ate in silence for a few minutes.

Eddie said, “We caught some nice fish yesterday, but I was thinking we’d go below the cabin past those huge boulders downstream.”

“Sounds good,” Kenny answered, but he was concerned. Eddie seemed to have something bothersome on his mind, and he asked, “Hey Eddie, you were subdued yesterday, is something wrong? Did I make you angry or something?”

Eddie backed away a bit and shook his head. “I’ve got a few things on my mind. Maybe we can discuss them at lunch today because I’m still trying to figure them out.”

Kenny got up from the table, walked towards the bathroom and said, “Anytime, Eddie. Just let me know.”

About thirty minutes later, they were walking downriver and crunching through the light snowpack along the Klamath. Kenny glanced at Eddie and observed his white ski cap on his smooth head and his matching fishing vest. Kenny was toasty and comfortable in his reliable gear of forest green waterproof pants and a crimson winter jacket.

Kenny clutched his Powell spinning rod and asked, “Hey Eddie, same deal as yesterday?”

Eddie grinned and replied, “Yep. But today, the guy that catches the most fish wins. Deal?”

Playfully, Kenny punched him in the shoulder and said, “Stand back, and let me show you how it’s done.”

Without a care in the world, they marched downstream towards a massive set of boulders and a swaying suspension bridge that Eddie’s father had built ten years ago. The unstable-looking bridge swung gently in the morning breeze, but Eddie warned, “Don’t worry, Kenny. That bridge will be here long after you and I are gone.”

They laughed and continued moving through the cold canyon as their dialogue echoed through the deep gorge. They arrived at the sagging bridge and Eddie pointed downriver. “You’ll find some excellent fishing holes behind those boulders. Last year, I pulled two big ones out of there. I’m going to cross the river and fish above you, but we’ll be able to see each other periodically. Sound good?”

Kenny winked at him and asked, “No problem. Would you like to meet up for lunch at noon?”

Eddie stepped onto the bridge and replied, "I'll meet you right here at lunchtime. Good luck, Kenny."

"Likewise, Eddie."

Kenny moved along the broad dark green river and imagined some of the stout silvery fish he was trying to catch. About an hour later and nearly a quarter-mile from Eddie fishing upstream, he allowed himself to have a great time. He'd momentarily forgotten about the problems waiting for him back home. Relaxed, he reeled in his fishing line, checked the orange lure and cast it into the river again. Through the sensitive tip of the fishing rod, he felt the metal lure pulling against the current as the artificial bait swung clockwise and hovered downstream.

With his lure tugging against the steady flow of the river, Kenny glanced upstream and saw a blonde woman in a pink fishing cap bounding down the hill behind Eddie. Perplexed, he inadvertently allowed his lure to drift and watched the outdoorsy-looking woman approach Eddie at a quickening pace. He saw Eddie pull back on his fishing pole and understood he had hooked up with another Steelhead. Eddie gave him a quick wave and resumed his duel with the fish.

The stranger in the pink hat ignored Eddie's battle with the leaping fish and dipped a hand into the side pocket of her blue fishing vest. As Eddie tangled with the large trout, Kenny saw the woman pull something shiny from her pocket.

A hot bolt of terror struck his nerves and Kenny shouted as loud as he could. "Eddie, watch out! Behind you, behind you!"

Kenny jumped up and down to signal Eddie that something was terribly wrong.

Eddie acknowledged him with another wave and Kenny realized Eddie couldn't hear him at all. Kenny watched in horror, as Eddie knelt at the water's edge and examined the beautiful fish he had landed.

Kenny began running upstream and dropped his fishing pole near the shoreline. He screamed, "Watch out, Eddie! Turn around!"

Eddie looked up after reviving the fish and releasing it. He observed Eddie cupping his ears, signaling to him that he couldn't hear what he was trying to say.

Eddie rinsed his hands in the river. The blonde woman crept up behind him and rammed her knee into the side of his unsuspecting face. Eddie tumbled backward like a circus clown and tried to get up. The blonde woman kicked him in the face three times with the toe of her boot and then stomped on his unprotected groin as if she were crushing an empty beer can. Eddie jackknifed in agony and the woman kned him in the face with sickening precision.

Mortified and burning with fear Kenny sprinted towards the low-slung bridge and watched Eddie cough blood. Eddie shook his head in bewilderment and tried to crawl away from the demonic woman attacking him. The woman pressed her hiking boot onto Eddie's back and forced him to the snowy ground.

"Oh, Jesus!" Kenny shrieked, as he tried to run faster. "Fight back, Eddie, fight back!"

He saw the blonde woman pounce on Eddie and straddle him from behind. In a flash, she wrapped a piece of razor wire around Eddie's neck and yanked back on it with all her might. She wrenched harder and leaned back to gain leverage as if she were sailing a small boat across a windy lake.

Instantly sick to his stomach, Kenny stopped in his tracks and yelled, “No! No!”

Eddie lay motionless on the ground and blood spilled from his throat onto the frozen rocks and snow. Kenny galloped upstream near the bridge but then a menacing and extremely hairy immense Paul Bunyan-like man appeared from behind the trees on his left. The big man in the plaid shirt had a glimmering steel knife in each one of his gnarled hands. He trounced across the stony bank and halted about twenty yards away, impeding his entrance to the swaying bridge.

Concern for his own life moved to the forefront, but he glanced across the river and murmured, “Don’t die, Eddie! Stay alive!”

His skin felt like it had been dunked in gasoline and ignited from the despair consuming him. He fainted to the right and left, but the bear-like man merely stood his ground and scuttled back and forth like a humanoid crab. The man glowered at him and squatted like a Sumo Wrestler poised on the matting of snowy rocks.

In a faint but audible voice, Kenny heard the blonde woman yell in their direction, “Yeti...Yeti, wait for Selina to help you!”

Out of the corner of his eye, Kenny noticed Selina hustling downstream towards the footbridge on the opposite side of the Klamath.

“Shit!” Kenny swore under his breath.

Yeti cut loose with a deadly throw of a knife. The well-aimed dagger flew like a tiny missile and dug into Kenny’s front-left hip.

Kenny grimaced between clenched teeth and staggered. “You mother f...”

Kenny reached down and tugged the impaled knife out of his damaged hip flexor and Yeti released another aerial assault. He looked up and quickly rolled to his left as the

glittering blade whizzed by him on its kamikaze mission. He scrambled to his feet, chucked the bloody blade into the river and took off on a dead run. He understood that he was no match for the knife-wielding assassin and didn't want to engage in hand-to-hand combat with the huge man's initial choice of weapons. He needed to create an advantage.

Kenny dashed and heard the beastly man chasing after him. He halted and picked up a baseball-sized rock. He whirled and saw Yeti closing in on him. He fired the smooth stone at the large man's face and the perfect throw hit Yeti squarely in the mouth. The imposing man wobbled for a few seconds and reached for his damaged teeth. He spat blood and ejected some jagged pieces of his shattered bicuspid.

Kenny moved downstream until he had located his fishing rod. Rushing, he scooped it up and hurriedly retrieved the excess fishing line. He turned around just in time to see his assailant's mad charge. Like an experienced Fencer competing in the Olympics, he sidestepped the man, then grunted and lashed Yeti across the face with his fishing pole, twice. Like magic, a wicked pair of painful looking welts materialized on the crest of Yeti's broken nose and gashed cheek.

The surprised giant clutched at his face and bellowed. "Ahhhh!"

Kenny's newfound enemy spun around and lunged after him. Yeti's right foot came down upon his fishing pole and snapped it like a dry twig.

They grappled like angry tigers and tumbled into the ice-cold waters of the Klamath. In a short time, the near-freezing temperatures of the river numbed Kenny's shocked body and they rolled downstream like otters battling for a scrap of shellfish.

Kenny came up for air and so did Yeti. Without waiting for another chance, Kenny lurched forward and bit off most of the man's bulbous fleshy nose. There was a

grotesque crunching sound and he found himself with a mouthful of rubbery tissue, blood, and gristle. He spat out Yeti's chewy remains and listened to the gigantic man gurgling in his own blood.

Anguished, Yeti bellowed, "Aayeeeeugh!"

Kenny glared into his terrified eyes and Yeti pleaded to him. "I no sweem! I no sweeeem!"

Cold water splashed around him like a monsoon. Kenny punched Yeti in his maimed face and shoved him underneath the water. He screamed, "And you never will!"

Locked together like mating pythons they tumbled over a small waterfall and fell into a deep green pool of picturesque beauty. With vengeance exploding in his heart, Kenny put the abominable man into a headlock and held him below the river. He forced his eyes to stay open, but the frigid water pierced his brain and gave him a nasty headache. He watched Yeti's head thrash amongst the rising air bubbles and tightened his grip on his thick neck. He noticed a school of Steelhead hovering in the background before they darted off to a safer location.

Nearly forty-five seconds elapsed before Kenny emerged from the Klamath downstream like a dripping wet, heaving apparition from the deep. Shivering and with chattering teeth, he made a break for it upstream and peeled off his waterlogged jacket to ward off the onset of frostbite. He pumped his arms faster and looked upriver at the waterfall he had just barreled over. He took a few more strides and then stopped in his tracks. Selina was cascading down the riverbank directly at him. She had a twisted expression of impending death on her face and the lethal weapon coiled in her left hand.

"You bitch!" Kenny yelled, and he gripped his soaked jacket in his cold hands.

Fearlessly, Selina zoomed in at him. He tossed his jacket at her like he was trying to net a wild animal. She screamed like a banshee when his jacket draped her head and was momentarily caught off guard by his makeshift sopping cloak. Selina removed the distraction and then Kenny hit her with the most devastating punch he had ever thrown in his life. The knuckles of his right fist connected with Selina's jaw and her head snapped and twisted to the left unnaturally. Her legs buckled, she dropped her weapon onto the rocks and collapsed in a drooling daze.

Unable to control himself Kenny picked up an icy rock the size of a holiday ham. He hoisted the boulder over his head and prepared to smash the woman's skull into putty. With teardrops streaming down his face, he gnashed his teeth and angrily uttered, "This is for you, Eddie!"

Moments later and huffing from exhaustion, Kenny arrived at Eddie's side. Large burgundy wings of Eddie's blood had spread out in the snow beneath his body. Gently, Kenny placed his hand under Eddie's head and his blood-covered gaping throat.

Eddie blinked and gurgled something unintelligible, "Ken...k...Fa...Fath..."

Crying, Kenny leaned closer to Eddie's mouth and desperately asked, "What, Eddie? What did you say?"

With his right ear near Eddie's blood-filled mouth, he listened intently and noticed that Eddie was clutching a tiny cross down by his waist. As if God had injected a quark of superhuman strength into Eddie's dying body, Eddie raised his hands a bit and spoke one last time. "Fa...Father!"

With his left hand, Kenny secured the bloodstained crucifix in Eddie's grip and replied, "Father, Eddie? Do you want me to give this to your dad?"

Eddie's mutilated body finally expired. Kenny kissed him on the forehead a few times and urgently said some prayers for his murdered friend.

Holding the small cross, Kenny stood up and shouted at the gloomy sky, his only comfort was his echoing voice reverberating in the wintry canyon.

Chapter 22

Before noon on Christmas Eve day, gentle drops of rain fell upon the umbrellas and uncovered heads of the people at Eddie Banks' untimely funeral in Austin, Texas, and Kenny's sad heart was laden with remorse.

The bleak and grassy cemetery on the outskirts of Austin was nearly deserted, except for the 125 people gathered around Eddie's mahogany casket. To Kenny's right sat the disbelieving and emotionally crushed parents and relatives of Eddie. On his left was every member of his coaching staff, along with a grim John McDough and humiliated Rebecca Jones.

Kenny had a flashback and recalled the brief meeting McDough had with him in the bathroom at the airport earlier that morning. McDough cornered him, jabbed his index finger into his chest and had spitefully demanded, "Kenny, I want to know why two Russians tried to kill both of you! Got it?"

As the black-robed Father Rudy began his thoughtful words of praise for the recently departed, Kenny looked over to the opposite side of Eddie's grave. The priest's kind words flowed over the crowd and Kenny listened to the sorrowful mourns of Eddie's family rise into the unforgiving sky. He glanced at Eddie's crying father while the man wailed like a distraught Pavarotti. Kenny reached into the pocket of his woolly black overcoat and laced his fingers around the small crucifix Eddie had entrusted him with.

During the priest's eloquent diction, a midnight-blue limousine rolled up quietly and came to a stop beneath the bare limbs of a birch tree. The rear passenger door opened, and a tall, nickel-haired man in a gray overcoat slid out from the backseat. Kenny looked at his boss but already knew that Percy was extremely unhappy. He saw Percy acknowledge a few people, but his boss deliberately chose to ignore him. Kenny felt his skin turn into lumpy gooseflesh when Percy slighted him.

Even though Kenny tried to stop it from happening, his mind replayed the scene of Eddie's death again and again. For the past couple of days, he'd been tormenting himself because he did not save his friend's life. He realized it was going to haunt him until the day he died.

Fifteen minutes later, Kenny was thrown back to reality by the familiar phrase coming out of the priest's mouth. "Ashes to ashes, and dust to dust. We will miss you, Eddie. God bless your beautiful soul. Amen."

Seated beside his wife, Eddie's stricken father looked to Kenny for some type of answer and he reasoned that the man wanted to know why his son was going to be lowered into the ground forever. Kenny's chest tightened as the grip of death encircled its nasty tentacles around his heart and squeezed it without mercy.

As everybody began saying goodbye to the corpse of Eddie, Kenny walked over to his late friend's coffin and kissed the top of it before saying, "I promise you, Eddie, your death will not go unpunished."

Kenny walked over to Eddie's parents and squatted down in front of them. Eddie's gray-haired mother refused to look at him until Eddie's father touched her chin

and said, “It’s not Coach Brown’s fault, Stella. Look at the man, because Eddie loved him like a brother.”

When Eddie’s parents were looking at him with sorrowful and bloodshot eyes, Eddie’s father used his trembling hands to hold onto Kenny. The elderly man said, “Coach, my son thought the world of you and Eddie told me that he would sacrifice his life for yours.” The old man cried steadily and went on, “Now he’s in heaven, and I want you to find out why! Can you do that for us, Coach Brown?”

The cascade of teardrops forming in Kenny’s fatigued eyes probably told the Eddie’s parent’s everything they needed to know. However, he wanted to say it out loud. “Yes, no matter what it takes. I’ll find out who killed your son, and why.”

Kenny turned over the man’s callused right hand and withdrew the small cross from his pocket. He placed the sparkling crucifix in the man’s waxy palm and said, “Sir, Eddie wanted you to have this.”

Eddie’s father looked at the glorious token and humbly replied, “Thank you.”

Kenny gripped his hand one more time before walking towards his coaching staff humbly gathered near a pyramid-shaped tombstone. All of them were subdued and had bleary and tired looking eyes from crying. Kenny placed his hand on top of the triangular tomb and gazed into the extremely haggard eyes of each man.

Finally, Kenny said, “Guys, I’m not sure what’s going on. In fact, my head has been spinning for the past few days. But I’m going to find out. If this has something to do with me or my past, then I’ll resign because I don’t want anybody else to get hurt. However, if this has something to do with what’s been going on recently, then heads are going to roll. Lots of them.”

Brody Dunn shook his head and replied, “Don’t lose control of yourself, Kenny. We’re counting on you. Okay?”

Kenny glanced down and read the dead woman’s name engraved on the pyramid tombstone, and Lou Macaw said, “Kenny, I’ve known you for most of my life, and if this has something to do with you, then I want to help you. Don’t even think about quitting; that wouldn’t be good for you, or us.”

Kenny looked at Phillip Zanton, Craig Jackson and Keith Greene. Not a word.

Then, Jeff McMillan inclined his head in the direction of the limousine and said, “Kenny, I think my uncle wants to talk with you. In fact, he’s been looking your way for a long time. See what I mean?”

Depressed and dejected, and feeling smaller and smaller with each step he took, Kenny meandered over to the long car.

Percy scowled, stepped aside and ordered, “Get in, Kenway.”

Soon, Kenny was seated across from the peeved billionaire and was given a blistering earful of harsh language from his boss.

Percy fired a series of questions at him. “What secret did Eddie know, or do you know something that you might have forgotten, Kenway? Who wanted Eddie dead? Does this have something to do with your gay coach? Or, could this possibly be related to your brother’s traumatic experience from last year? As you know, Charles Canter was a very popular man, and you made a few enemies after that scenario played itself out.”

Percy inhaled and went on. “Are you listening to me, Kenway? Because it looks like you’re out to lunch!”

When Kenny thought his boss had finished talking, to be sure, he kept his mouth shut and waited. When Kenny looked up, he realized Percy was waiting for him to speak.

Incredulously, Percy asked, “Are you going to *say* something, Kenway?”

Kenny sat up and replied, “Boss, I’ve already told the homicide detectives everything I know.”

Percy seemed to bite off his reply, chew it and spit it out, before saying, “I know that, Kenway. But think...think man! What else did Eddie know? He must have known something, or he wouldn’t be dead! What was it?”

Kenny looked into Percy’s clear blue eyes and replied, “On Sunday morning, I asked Eddie if there was something bothering him.”

“And what did he tell you?” Percy asked impatiently.

Kenny rotated his palms upward and stated, “He never got the chance.”

Percy scoffed at him with contempt in his voice. “You had better find out what it was, Kenway! It could possibly be that Eddie knew something vital. And if so, then somebody almost certainly wants you dead as well!”

Quietly, Kenny responded, “I agree.”

Percy cleared his throat and asked, “I don’t give a shit if you agree with me, Kenway! And don’t placate me! Do you understand the ramifications of this fucked up situation? Your life and your career are at stake! Wake up!”

Kenny placed his fingers on his aching temples. The fact Percy cut loose with profanity was another telling sign of how horrible things had become. Quietly, Kenny replied, “Yes, my entire self is in jeopardy and everything that goes with it.”

Percy's face twitched but he said nothing in return. Percy opened the door and his stern look of disgust, replete with frowning lips instructed Kenny that their meeting was over. Kenny slipped out of the car like a whipped dog. Percy did not offer to shake hands.

Kenny stood up outside the car, turned around and looked down at Percy in the limo. "Boss, I am so sorry about this. But I'm not going to give up until I find out why Eddie was murdered."

The billionaire's face relaxed a bit and he rebutted, "I would expect nothing less of you, Kenway. It's time to pick up the pace and don't let anybody stand in your way. Be ruthless. Do it for Eddie, but whatever you do...do not disappoint me! I won't stand for it. And remember, there's a long list of coaches who could do your job a whole lot better than you're doing it now."

Percy's icy statement seemed to grab him by the shoulders and shake him into minuscule pieces of humiliated debris. Kenny nodded but remained silent.

Percy shut the door and his window rolled down. Percy leaned his head out of the window into the drizzle and said, "Kenway, I've sent a check for one million dollars to the parents of Edward Banks for their pain and suffering. It's the least I could do. And, please tell my nephew, Jeff to give me a call."

The limo eased away, and Percy remarked, "Have a Merry Christmas, Kenway."

Kenny blinked and glanced over at Jeff McMillan chatting with Father Rudy. The limousine drove off and Kenny realized he had totally forgotten about Christmas.

Chapter 23

On Christmas morning as the sun's golden glow broached the horizon, Kenny rolled over in his bed and pressed his aroused body against Athena. She stirred for a moment and fell back to sleep. He tried harder and she finally came out of her daze.

They were drained from the previous night's lovemaking, but he also wasn't in the mood to talk. He didn't need psychological counseling or therapy. He wanted Athena to succumb to his innermost sexual urges.

Kenny began caressing Athena's body, but she pushed his hands away and groggily said, "Not now, Kenny. Maybe later. Merry Christmas and I love you."

Quietly, he replied, "I love you...Merry Christmas."

He was not sure if he could corral his rising temper about the state of his life and didn't want to funnel his aggression towards Athena. He got out of bed, walked into the bathroom and turned on the bathtub faucet. Later, they took a hot bath together in the extra-large tub and downed their coffee in silence. He'd been living in a whirlpool of controversy the past few weeks and had failed to venture up to the Sierra foothills to cut down a Christmas tree as he normally did each year. His normally cheery house yearned for some holiday pageantry, but it was obviously too late, and he knew it would have to wait until next season.

By nine o'clock in the morning, they had finished eating breakfast and Athena asked, "Kenny, are you still planning on going to the church this morning?"

He grinned, but his stubborn mind was already set, “Yes, it’s about time I did something like this. I should have done it a long time ago...that’s for sure.”

Athena put on her heels and waited for him to appraise her attractive holiday outfit. “Well...how do you like it, Kenny?”

He stood up and responded, “I love it and you look beautiful.”

He hustled upstairs, brushed his teeth, changed into fresh clothes and loped downstairs. He hugged Athena, kissed her and said. “I’ll meet you at my parent’s house, at noon.”

Kenny went outside to his truck. Confusing images about what he should do sprinted through his brain. He realized he was bordering on the obsessive and it made him nervous about his mental health. More than anybody else on earth, he desperately wanted to capture or kill the criminals who had orchestrated Eddie’s death. He pounded his fists on the hood of his truck several times until his hands ached.

His personality had become murky and sullen, and his normally distinct thought process was starting to become diluted. Even though he was putting up a valiant front to protect his damaged ego and injured psyche, he was crumbling like a sand castle hit by the encroaching tides and he knew it.

Kenny got into his truck, whispered and pleaded, “I need help.”

He drove away from home as millions of pajama-clad people in the bay area were joyfully ripping open their batch of Christmas gifts. He arrived at the McMillan College campus and parked his truck in the parking lot of the church.

Silently, he paused and prepared for his very first confession. He sat in his vehicle and pondered the meaning of life while chewing on his lower lip and thought. I'm confused. I'm angry. And, I want some answers...now!

At nine-thirty he walked into the cathedral and Father Rudy greeted him near the doorway. He looked at the priest's shimmering ivory robe and a bright red scarf around his neck. He glanced at the people gathered in the pews and scanned the rows of ancient knights positioned along each side of the church.

"Good morning, Father Rudy."

The priest gave him a broad grin and replied, "Merry Christmas, Kenway."

He said, "Thanks for meeting with me today. And I apologize for inquiring about your services at the wrong time before Eddie's funeral. But the urge to express my thoughts and feelings has overwhelmed me."

The priest calmly asked, "What can I do for you, Kenway?"

Kenny rubbed his eyes and stated, "Father Rudy, I need some guidance as to why all of this stuff is happening. Can you try and help me, please?"

Father Rudy looked deep into his eyes and replied, "Would you like to experience your first confession, Kenway?"

Kenny nodded. "Do we have enough time do to it now?"

The priest glanced up at the antique clock on the wall and calmly replied, "Yes, but we've only got about ten minutes because the rest of my congregation will be here shortly."

The priest headed towards the darkly wooded confessional at the far side of the church and Kenny trailed him. Once there, Kenny entered the booth and the priest went

into his concealed box on the opposite side. Kenny closed the door and sat down on the softly padded chair. The small window between himself and Father Rudy slid upward with a slight swoosh, the fine netting obscuring the details of the priest's face.

Easily, he discerned the shadowy profile of Father Rudy but realized that all bets were off, and he could tell the kind statesman of the church his innermost feelings.

In a hushed tone, the priest asked, "How can I help you, my son?"

Kenny hesitated and answered, "I feel like I'm responsible for Eddie's death, and I can never forgive myself it."

The priest paused and asked, "Why do you feel like that, my son?"

"It's obvious to me," Kenny replied, "that Eddie was murdered because he knew something vital. Whatever it was, the horrible people involved were spooked and they didn't want him to tell me about it. That's why they sent two assassins after us, instead of waiting to kill Eddie later when he was alone."

The priest sat up and asked, "Did he tell you anything important, my son?"

Kenny mumbled, "No, but it must've been critical because Eddie was concerned about something for sure. As you know, Eddie believed in God's plan, but..."

"That might be, but what about you, Kenway? Do you believe in God and the plans he has in store for us?"

Kenny wanted to reply to the priest's line of questioning but hesitated for a few seconds, and then decided to tell the truth. "Yes, I believe in God. In fact, I love God and I'm thankful for the opportunities God has given me. I want to believe that the Lord has a master plan, but now I'm not so sure."

The priest replied, “Just like a grandmaster painter who creates an image on the canvas, only God knows what the finished product will look like before it’s finished.”

Kenny picked at the wooden border of the mesh window separating them and asked, “What about death, Father Rudy? What kind of role does God play during the process of dying?”

The priest shifted in his seat and replied, “During the time of our soul’s transition from this life, the Lord is with each one of us, my son. God never leaves our side, ever. Even though often it appears he has deserted us.”

He contemplated the priest’s answer and heard numerous sets of footsteps walking down the slick corridors of the church. He understood his time was up, and said, “Father Rudy, what should I do?”

The priest whispered, “Be patient...do nothing and trust in the goodness of the Lord.”

He exhaled, leaned back against the planks of the confessional and replied, “Thank you, Father Rudy. Can I visit with you again if I need to?”

The priest pushed up on the mesh window and slid his left hand through the small opening. He said, “Of course you can, my son. But, when you’re unable to be in the company of the church, keep this token of Jesus’ love with you at all times and trust in God.”

Kenny held his right hand underneath the priest’s clenched fingers. The priest uncurled his digits and deposited a tiny bejeweled cross in his palm. It was dim inside the dark booth, and he brought his hand up to his face to check out the symbolic cross from

the priest. The priest stood up and exited from his side of the confessional without a word before blending with his arriving patrons.

Back in the solitary booth of the confessional, Kenny stared at the miniature cross as waves of shock, grief, and anxiety hit him with the force of a tsunami. Dismayed, he struggled with a bounty of confusing thoughts, issues, and questions.

To himself, Kenny asked, “Where did you get this Cross, Father Rudy? Is this yours, or did Eddie’s father give it to you?”

Kenny started to feel lightheaded and flung the door open to get some air. He stormed out of the booth like a man who had been suffocating. He noticed the priest mingling with some devout followers but ignored the holy man and briskly walked across the marble floors of the church. A tad dizzy from the unexpected, he found his way outside and sucked in some deep breaths of fresh air. He broke towards his truck and then hopped inside of it.

About an hour later he had driven to the top of the 3,849-foot tall Mt. Diablo State Park. He parked and then walked over to the stone retaining wall that kept tourists from tumbling down the face of the mountain. There wasn’t a cloud in the sky and even though he felt like being alone, he understood that on a beautiful Christmas morning he had no choice but to share the stunning view of the bay area with other sightseers. His sunglasses filtered the sun’s rays and he gazed westward over the rolling hills and across the shimmering waters of the bay. He peered at the distant image of the San Francisco skyline.

Perspiring from his rampaging thoughts, and emotionally wrecked and overwhelmed, Kenny removed his shades and looked at the powder blue sky. He asked

the heavens, “Eddie, what were you trying to tell me? What father were you talking about, Eddie? Your father...Father Rudy, or...*somebody else?*”

Kenny extracted the tiny cross from his slacks and examined it under the wide-open sunshine. Slowly, he twirled the crucifix between his fingers. He was certain that his cross was identical to the one Eddie had given him before he died.

“Damn it!” Kenny exclaimed, “I don’t understand!”

Two plump ladies saddled up to him and the heaviest woman asked him to snap their picture. He agreed to their request and her friend handed him a camera. He took a couple of shots for them and when he returned the camera, the chubby lady said, “That’s a beautiful cross! If you don’t mind me asking, where did you get it?”

“It was a gift.” He said. Then he waved goodbye and walked back to his truck.

Kenny steered his truck down the winding road of Mt. Diablo and drove until he arrived at his parent’s house in the city of Highlands. He tried to will himself out of a mental stupor because he had many things to be thankful for. His health was decent, and his family and friends loved him. He parked his truck and moved towards the front door.

Kenny rang the doorbell and heard the classic Christmas song, Frosty the Snowman ebbing through the front door. He listened to the familiar tune until the front door swung open.

Chapter 24

On an overcast initial day of the New Year, I observed the pink and yellow flowers on the hill behind my house while standing next to a bare apple tree. I thought about my New Year's resolution and wondered if I would adhere to it.

I asked myself aloud, "Will I ever kill again?"

I paced on the balcony deck and reentered my home. I took off my striped sweater and faded blue jeans. I tossed the garments into the hamper and took a lengthy shower. At ten o'clock in the morning, I poured a glass of iced-tea and strode to the telephone.

I dialed a number and spoke to my lover on the other end of the line. "Phillip?"

"Rudy? How are you?" Phillip retorted, obviously surprised by my call.

"I've been better," I replied, "and I miss you. Would you like to come over tonight?" I was willing to risk almost everything to be with him at this point.

Phillip replied, "I've got my kids...Billy and Martha are staying with me until tomorrow morning."

I said, "You can bring them with you if you want to." My catastrophic loneliness had won the battle versus my pride. I cringed with shameless guilt and summoned God's iron will to steady me once again.

Phillip grumbled and said, "I don't think that's a good idea, Rudy. They're too old for me to lie to, and I can't want to risk telling them the truth right now."

"I understand," I replied. I drank some tea and continued, "I missed you last night and I had a terrible New Year's Eve without you."

There was a long pause and Phillip concurred, “I miss you also, but it was also good for me to be away from you for a while. I’m very confused, and I’m not sure what I want, or if I want to be involved with you at this time. Things have gotten kind of weird and uncomfortable between us, Rudy.”

Jilted, I was surprised by my lover’s unexpected standoff, and I asked, “Have I done something to make you mad, Phillip?”

Unexpectedly, Phillip called my bluff. “I don’t know, Rudy. Have you?”

I was never going to tell Phillip about my heavy-handed role in the cruel death of Eddie Banks. Phillip’s commitment to our relationship appeared to be wavering and under no circumstances would I reveal my capacity for ruthless action. Dearly, I prayed to God and asked for help in returning Phillip’s love back to me, as to fulfill me again with tender feelings. Hope for our love was not lost, but I needed God to steer it my way

With a developing temper, I forcefully said, “Don’t play games with me, Phillip. Why are you upset with me? Be blunt.”

After an uncomfortably long break, Phillip replied, “Sorry, I had to make sure the kids were not within earshot of me. Where do you want me to begin, Rudy? Should I start with your inexplicably cold attitude towards me after Dante blackmailed us? Or how about the killing of Dante, in which you involved me after the fact?”

I sensed Phillip’s hostility flowing through the phone lines as if it were a lethal disease, and I barked, “Dante deserved to die, he was trying to ruin our lives, Phillip!”

Phillip huffed, “What about Eddie Banks? Did he have to die too, Rudy? Did you have Eddie killed, Rudy? And, what about the stuff that happened to Kenny?”

Phillip seemed to have caught on to my true intent and previous acts of deliberate self-preservation. I fibbed, “I don’t know what you’re talking about, Phillip. But I resent your horrible accusations. If you believe I had anything to do with Eddie’s death, then why haven’t you gone to the police?”

I needed to see if I could flush Phillip out from the weeds of truth.

Phillip retorted, “I’ve thought about going to the cops, Rudy. Believe me, more than you might think! So shut the hell up and listen to me!”

Momentarily thrown off kilter by his forcefulness, I felt out of my element and was used to having the upper hand in all my dealings with Phillip. It had been the natural structure of our loving relationship, but the framework was now shaky.

I tried to remain calm and stated, “Ok, Phillip. Go ahead, I’m listening.”

Phillip went away from the telephone for a moment to deal with his children.

After a few moments, Phillip returned to the line and said, “I love you so much, Rudy, but I’m not going to sugarcoat it. So...here’s the way I see it. I have a few options available to me. Number one, I can come out of the closet and let the world know I’m gay. But after everything that’s happened people would burn me at the stake like a warlock, and my kids would be put through hell for the rest of their lives.”

“Correct. Go on.” I agreed.

“Two,” Phillip continued, “I could resign and attempt to land a coaching job with another team. But if I do that, everybody will know it’s me because the McMillan College football program won’t have to contend with *that* problem anymore. Do you understand?”

“Yes.” I concurred, and my respect for Phillip’s perception grew.

“My last option is this, Rudy; I can turn you into the police for the murder of Dante and then hope for the best. I would go to jail for concealing a crime and it would ruin my life with Billy and Martha. And my kids are way too important to me.”

“Agreed, but you’re not going to do that. Are you?” I replied somewhat confidently and begging to the Lord that I was correct in my assumption.

Phillip continued talking. “I can’t understand how in the world you’re holding up so well, Rudy? I have tremendous guilt stacked up inside of me. Don’t you?”

I was cautious and queried, “Guilt...about what, Phillip?”

“Help me, oh mighty Allah!” Phillip screamed back at me. “Are you mad, Rudy? Guilt...guilt about everything that’s happened to us during the past few weeks since I told Kenny!”

I wouldn’t budge and curtly replied, “Life is not always fair, Phillip. You know that by now. Let the Lord be thy judge and let nothing stand in your way.”

Phillip would have none of it and he fired back, “Don’t lecture me about that, and don’t preach to me, either, *Father Rudy!*”

I gripped the phone as hard as I could and steamed with malice and revolt. After taking a deep breath, I listened to both of Phillip’s children scampering through his house. I heard Billy plead to Phillip, “Come on, Dad! Play outside with us!”

Phillip spoke to me in a cold manner. “I’ve got to go, Rudy. Can I call you later?”

“I hope so,” I said, and then I asked, “Phillip, have you decided what you want to do about us? Which one of those options do you prefer?”

“No, not yet, Rudy. But last night I made a New Year’s resolution and I intend to keep it.”

“Really?” A pinprick of curiosity danced on my skin. I was frightened and I poked around for the answer by asking, “And what was your resolution?”

Phillip spoke loudly at me. “I got down on my knees and I prayed, Rudy! I asked Allah for help. And now, if somebody asks me what I think, I’m going, to tell the truth, because I can’t live like this any longer! It’s ripping my guts out! Goodbye, Rudy!”

After the line went dead, I hung up the receiver and absentmindedly lolled onto the deck of my balcony. My mind skipped through a variety of fond memories about my fading life with Phillip. Yearning, I wanted our dreams to come true and thought about the pleasant days when we had initially courted each other in New York while working at a charitable event for underprivileged children. The secret hideaway vacations we had taken together without anybody ever discovering the truth of our getaways. Venturing to Costa Rica, where we’d rented separate hotel rooms and discreetly acted like mere acquaintances. Those days were long gone, like ashes blown away by the wind.

Now, I cast my sorrowful gaze over the vastness of the bay area and arrived at the most heartbreaking decision of my life. Unforgiving, the overpowering forces of nature had crushed our relationship and the relentless world was to blame for our fateful misery. My loving bond with Phillip had been forced from me like an exhaled breath. The sickening greed of a deceased blackmailer and the unlucky course of Eddie’s ill-begotten route back to his motorcycle parked behind my church had obliterated all hope of Phillip and I sharing a life together.

With increasingly divine clarity I was beginning to understand the rooted source of what was beckoning me. The images of my plan were still a bit cloudy and in jigsaw pattern throughout my brain, but the scope of it was coming together piece by piece. I had

an unholy and bizarre vision of rescuing my abducted life with Phillip, and a rush of happiness filled in the last shred of my ethereal spirit.

I paced on the deck and realized it was time to set my alternative plans in motion. I guessed, but then trusted in the awesomeness of the Lord that I could probably get through the next couple of weeks without being unmasked by the investigative forces exploring Eddie's death. I sensed the circumstantial chips of evidence circling around me and felt like I couldn't wait much longer. Things were misaligned and my ultimate plan needed to adjust. But then, after preparing the groundwork for my surprising exit, I could flee the country and start a new life abroad. And most importantly, hopefully, it would be with Phillip.

In the best-case scenario, I could create a fresh persona in another part of the world, using the Lord's tender navigation because my life's compass was no longer working. Maybe this time God would finally set me free of my incessant pain and allow me to live in virtue for the rest of my life...and beyond.

But at the very worst...well, I already knew the answer to that.

Chapter 25

The next day on a clear and bitterly cold Friday afternoon, Kenny escorted both humorless homicide detectives to the front door of his home and said, "I know that we've been through this before, but if I think of anything else, you guys will be the first to know. You've got my word on it."

The salt-and-pepper haired, Detective Wilson Vanderveen stuck out his fleshy right hand and replied, "Thanks, Kenny. Don't worry, we're going to find the son-of-a-bitch behind this."

Kenny nodded and opened the door for them. He watched both men step down from the front porch and walked across his lawn before slipping into their Buick sedan. After they drove off, he shut the door and went back to the kitchen. He was hungry but he didn't feel like cooking.

He picked up the telephone and was surprised because he couldn't hear a dial tone. He clicked the depressor several times and asked, "Hello? Hello?"

After his query, a nervous tinny voice came through the phone line and asked. "Is Kenny Brown there, please?"

"Speaking." Kenny replied, and he asked, "Who is this?"

The unfamiliar yet masculine tone replied, "I have some information and I think you'll find it rather useful."

He ignored the man's statement and repeated, "Who is this?"

The secretive man replied, "My name is Marty. Are you interested in what I have to say?"

“About what?” He asked hastily.

“First of all,” Marty said, “This is not a crank call. I’m a McMillan College alum, class of 1990.”

The hair on Kenny’s arms stood up. He tugged at his burgundy-colored sweat pants and replied, “I’m still listening.”

“Good,” Marty replied, then he continued, “More importantly, I don’t want Phillip Zanton to get hurt. That’s why I called you.”

He was intrigued but wanted to know something first. “Marty, how did you get my home number?”

“Never mind,” Marty said. “Do you want to hear what I have to say?”

“Yes,” He answered.

“Good. Then meet me tonight at ten o’clock sharp, at a place called The Kingdom in San Francisco. It’s at Eighth and Harrison. Do you know where it is?” Marty said.

He replied, “Yes, I’ve driven by it a zillion times on my way to a Giant’s game. But I’ve never been inside.”

“Fine,” Marty said.

“What do you look like?” Kenny asked.

“Don’t worry about it,” Marty answered. “I know what you look like.”

“Okay,” Kenny replied, “I’ll see you tonight.”

“And please...come alone,” Marty demanded. “I’m on your side. Trust me.”

Kenny hung up the telephone and started walking through his house rubbing at his chin and staring at the floor. He thought. Who is Marty? Is that his real name? Is he

telling me the truth about being on my side? What does he know about Phillip? Should I trust him?

Kenny grew more frustrated. His mouth was dry, and he was craving some nourishment. He picked up the phone and ordered a large pizza. After that, he called Athena at her condo in San Francisco.

She picked up during the second ring, "Hello."

"Hi, Athena."

"What a nice surprise! How are doing, Kenny?" Athena asked.

"Not good. Something has come up and I have to cancel dinner for this evening."

Athena was disappointed and he heard it in her voice, when she asked, "What is it, Kenny?"

He explained the details and Athena replied, "Sounds suspicious."

"Relax, it's a public place." He countered.

"Forget it, Kenway Alan Brown." Athena's voice was anxious and authoritative, and she blasted him. "Either you take me with you tonight or I'm calling the police myself. Any questions?"

That night as a frosty blanket of fog-shrouded San Francisco, Kenny parked his truck on Sacramento Street near the rectangular green of Lafayette Park near Athena's home. He was late and took three giant strides up the Victorian staircase of her beautiful condominium complex. A pair of immaculately painted eggplant and lime beveled columns stood guard as he approached the pitched doorway. He rang the buzzer and she arrived twenty seconds later from her second-story location. She looked delicious in a

pair of jeans, black boots and a black top with a leather jacket. She wore a shiny platinum and abalone necklace with a matching bracelet on her left wrist. Her auburn hair was loose and carefree.

They got into his truck and headed south on Hyde Street amongst the party-going crowds. In silence, they drifted by the Hastings College of Law and a vacant library. They crossed through a busy intersection at Market Street as the causeway of Hyde Street automatically changed into Eighth. Less than a minute later they arrived at the corner of Eighth and Harrison. Kenny spun a U-turn and came to a rough stop in a half-full parking lot across the way from The Kingdom. Kenny looked towards the neon-lit medieval looking dance club. He sat in the truck, gazing at the castle-like structure he was about to enter. It was an impressive building and it reminded him of the Tower of London.

Athena turned to him and asked, “Are you ready?”

He gazed at her deep-blue eyes and they glimmered underneath the splashing light from the lamps above the avenue.

He kissed her and said, “If I’m not back in thirty-minutes, use your cell phone and the police.”

Athena reached into her hand purse and placed her cell phone on the dashboard of his truck. “Gotcha, good luck and I love you.”

Kenny left the keys dangling in the ignition.

After forking over a twenty-dollar bill for the cover charge, he walked into The Kingdom and was overwhelmed by the thumping music. The automated and rigidly shifting colorful lighting system spun an assortment of vivid hues all over the place, and

he noticed the lights bouncing off his slacks and shirt. Same-sex couples were mingling in every nook and cranny, but he took little notice and kept alert.

While waiting to meet his contact at the sandstone bar, he sipped at a beer and then felt somebody's fingertips tap him on the left shoulder. He turned around and looked at one of the best-looking examples of the male species he'd ever seen. The enigmatic man was about his height with a wavy mop of copper-colored hair, blue-green eyes, perfect skin, and a dazzling smile.

The man shook his hand with a firm grip and said, "I'm Marty, and you must be Kenny Brown."

"In person." He replied. He bought them a round of beers and said, "Let's find a place that's more comfortable so we can sit down and talk."

Very soon they were seated at a small round table that they'd moved to the side of the silver and red checkerboard dance floor.

Kenny looked at Marty and said, "My girlfriend is waiting for me outside. I don't have a lot of time."

The dead serious glare he shot Marty was undeniable. He wanted Marty to know that he didn't trust him, yet.

Marty sampled his beer and placed his mug on the table. "I was Phillip's first lover, but that was several years ago."

"Hmm," Kenny replied. "When Phillip first met with me several weeks ago, he told me that he'd once been involved with another man, other than his current partner. But, he didn't mention your name to me."

Kenny took a swig of his draft, wiped his mouth and asked, “Marty, why did you call me?”

Marty furrowed his brow and said, “Well, as you can probably guess, I’ve been following the McMillan College story in the news. Then it dawned on me when I read the list of names on your coaching staff.” Marty chugged some beer and continued, “I’ll always love Phillip, but I have the feeling he’s in serious danger.”

“Why?” Kenny asked warily, as a pair of gay men locked together in a passionate embrace inadvertently brushed against the back of his head. Kenny leaned forward out of the way of the dancing maneuvers.

Marty shook his head and held up his left index finger. “Before I tell you what I know, Kenny, I need to ask you a basic question. Is that okay with you?”

Kenny shrugged, and Marty asked, “Do you support the gay lifestyle that Phillip has chosen?”

Kenny drank the rest of his beer, put down his spent mug and replied, “No offense, Marty, but I work for McMillan College and I don’t get paid to agree or disagree with my assistants’ private lives or their sexual orientation. I’ve said this before, there’s nothing in the NCAA coaching manual about a person’s sexual orientation.”

Marty smirked and nodded, then quipped, “Expertly, you dodged answering my question.”

Kenny slapped his right hand against the tabletop and angrily snapped, “Look, Marty. It’s none of your fucking business what I think. You called me to talk. Got it?”

Marty blushed, blinked a few times and glanced at the furtive lights above the dance floor. Eventually, Marty explained, “After Phillip and I had dated for almost two months he came back from the east coast. However, he was more distant and standoffish, and I could tell something had changed between us.”

“What happened?” Kenny asked.

“Phillip told me he’d met another man. But you need to understand something, even though Phillip was still married to his wife, Darcy, he was experimenting with his newfound sexuality with me. But he had a gut feeling this new guy was the real deal.”

Kenny sat up and quickly asked, “Are you telling me that Phillip was still living with his wife while dating you, and then he also met this other man?”

Marty nodded and went on, “Yes, he’s very good looking and has a hard time pushing people away. Phillip has a good heart, Kenny, and sometimes it gets him into trouble.”

Marty continued, “Anyway, we fought like spurned lovers, but we eventually settled down. We discussed the things that we wanted out of life, and Phillip told me he was definitely going to, ‘give it a go’ with his new man and leave his wife when the timing was right.”

“Hmm,” Kenny mumbled. He fiddled with his empty beer mug and bluntly asked, “Okay, Marty. What does this have to do with the McMillan College football program?”

Marty shook his head and quickly said, “It’s bigger than that.”

Kenny gave him a quizzical look. “Why?”

“The last time Phillip and I got together we went out for dinner at Fisherman’s Wharf. He confided in me and even though he knew I was a McMillan College alumnus, it never occurred to either of us that he’d be coaching football there a few years later.”

“What did he tell you?” Kenny prodded him impatiently.

Marty answered, “Phillip told me he was involved with a powerful man and his new lover happened to be employed by McMillan College.”

Kenny’s eyelids sprang open and he exclaimed, “Really?”

Marty’s face contorted with the unmistakable pain of the interconnecting circumstances, and he said, “Yes, and when I learned about the murder of Eddie Banks, I figured it was time for me to call you. At first, I was going to speak with Phillip directly, but then I realized he probably wouldn’t trust me now.”

Kenny shook his head and struggled to piece together the scattered bits of information coming at him from all angles. He asked, “Did Phillip ever mention a name to you?”

Leaning closer, Marty said, “On accident, yes. He let it slip one time but then he swore me to secrecy. After tonight, Kenny, no matter what I’m out of the picture and you will never hear from me again. So, don’t come looking for me.”

Kenny nodded quickly and heatedly said, “Name! Tell me the man’s name, please!”

Unblinking, he stared at Marty while everybody inside The Kingdom partied the night away. The vibrating music penetrated his skin and he was about to push on Marty a little more but then Marty sat up and looked him in the eye.

“Marty,” Kenny said hastily, “My girlfriend is waiting for me in the truck. And if I don’t walk out of here in less than a minute, she’s going to call the cops.”

The music continued to pound away at Kenny’s ears. He stared at Marty for a few more seconds, and then rose from his chair frustrated and totally out of patience.

Marty reached out and gripped his left wrist with surprising strength.

Kenny gazed down at him and eventually Marty replied, “Rudy.”

Chapter 26

On Saturday night Kenny drove his truck on Highway 24 towards the campus and was frightened about what would happen to everybody associated with the football program if things got even worse. For most of his life, he had tried to live by the highest standards of morality but had often failed. Now, his life was falling apart like a sandcastle undercut by the encroaching tides.

Darkness crept over the foothills and a drizzling rain presented itself on his windshield. He gazed at the slick road and was momentarily hypnotized by the wiper blades pendulum action. His radio was tuned into the Fiesta Bowl college football game, but it seemed inconsequential compared to what he was dealing with.

At five-fifteen he pulled into the parking lot of Bunker Hill Stadium and shortly was in the facility making his way to the coach's office on the second floor. As far as he could tell nobody was in the building. He entered the office and turned on the lights. He placed his briefcase on the conference table and sat down in one of the swivel chairs adjacent to it.

Seconds later Phillip walked in and greeted him with a frigid stare.

Kenny said, "Hello, Phillip. Take a seat."

Phillip kept his mouth shut, removed his sweat jacket and draped it over the back of his chair. Kenny was steaming mad and furious, and his face flushed. It took all his will power to not rise from his seat and grab Phillip by the throat.

He took a manila folder out of his briefcase and plopped it onto the table in front of him. Phillip stared back at him and Kenny fiddled with his yellow and Kelly-green Oakland A's baseball cap.

After a lengthy silence, Kenny opened the file and reviewed it for a while. Finally, he glanced up and looked across the table at his troubled coach.

Kenny stated, "When you walked into my office a few weeks ago, you were convinced that your life was about to be ruined. Isn't that correct, Phillip?"

"Yes, that's true," Phillip replied.

Kenny inclined his head and went on, "Understandably, you were worried about your children's well-being, and you didn't want them to get hurt."

Phillip responded, "Yes, our lives would have been ripped to shreds."

Kenny removed his cap, scratched his head and put it back on. "Phillip, if you were in my shoes at this very moment, what would you do?"

Obviously unnerved, Phillip got up and shuffled around the office. He walked over to the white grease-boards and picked up a blue felt pen.

He turned to Kenny and asked, "Coach, do you remember when we initially discussed this problem a few weeks ago?"

"Of course."

Phillip continued. "You made a list of pro's and cons, and we examined the situation as best as we could. However, neither of us figured that Eddie Banks was going to be murdered."

Kenny agreed.

In thick lettering, Phillip wrote Eddie's initials on the board. EB

He realized Phillip was trying to tell him something. Kenny glanced down at the sheet of paper in front of him and asked, "Phillip, what happened to the person that was blackmailing you and your lover?"

Kenny watched Phillip tighten his grip around the pen. He saw Phillip close his eyes and tap the board with the tip of his pen. After a brief silence, Phillip huffed, sagged his shoulders and replied, "He was killed, but I didn't do it."

Kenny's eyes ran back and forth across Phillip's profile, and he tried to absorb the magnitude of the ever-worsening situation. Slowly, he stood up and crossed over towards Phillip.

Kenny rubbed his chin, then looked up Phillip's face and bitterly asked, "Who did it, Phillip. Who killed the blackmailer?"

He sensed that Phillip felt like a trapped animal squirming for its life. Phillip avoided eye contact with him, and Kenny realized he might be close to hitting the jackpot.

After Phillip's eyes had finished darting about, Kenny locked eyes with him and then Phillip coughed up the answer. "I believe my former lover did, but I wasn't there. So, I can't prove it." Phillip set down his pen and finished, "He has an airtight alibi and the body of the victim was destroyed."

Kenny wanted to scream, but grimaced and calmly asked, "How?"

"I think he was eaten by a Polar Bear at the San Francisco Zoo." Phillip shook his head, uttered the word, "Disgusting," and blandly stared down at his hands.

“*That* was the guy blackmailing you two?” Kenny asked incredulously. “I read about him in the paper. They found one of his ears and a few tips of his fingers, but the authorities at the zoo thought he fell into the pit on accident.”

Phillip nodded and frowned.

Kenny realized he needed proof in order to catch the people responsible for Eddie’s murder, but he wasn’t sure how to get it. He couldn’t stop his reaction from happening and his face twisted into a menacing sneer. “Phillip, did Eddie Banks know about you and your lover?”

Phillip swallowed hard and told the truth. “I don’t know if he knew who my former lover was. I’m not sure.”

Kenny’s brow furrowed and he croaked, “Former lover?”

Phillip frowned and replied, “Yes, I’ve had enough of his bullshit lies. We’re finished.”

Kenny tilted his chin and asked, “Really? Does your ex-lover know that?”

Phillip shook his head and quipped, “Almost, but not yet.”

Kenny stared at him with a poker face and asked, “Does he work on this campus?”

Phillip appeared to be punch-drunk by his hard-hitting but justified questions.

However, Phillip rang true one more time. “Yes, he’s an employee of this college.”

“Fuck me!” Kenny exclaimed as he turned his face towards the ceiling.

A cannon ball of remorse slammed into Kenny's stomach and stayed there wedged between in his gut. He reached into the folder and took out a small gray envelope. He opened it and dumped the contents into his left hand.

"You are in some serious shit, Phillip," Kenny stated firmly.

"I know," Phillip replied.

"Really, really serious," Kenny repeated.

Kenny looked up at his assistant coach and said, "Phillip, when you played football in the pros you could run fast and somebody nicknamed you, "The Streak!"

Phillip grinned and Kenny continued. "But you also had a great pair of hands and could catch anything thrown your way."

Kenny tossed the small object into the air and it sailed towards Phillip in an arcing slope. Phillip reacted accordingly and the golden object floated his way. Phillip reached out with his right hand and snatched the petite cross out of the air. Kenny watched him draw the sparkling crucifix closer to his face and gaze at it.

Resignedly, Phillip looked back to him and whispered, "I don't know for sure if Rudy actually had Eddie killed. He won't tell me that."

Kenny didn't know what to believe and retorted, "Phillip, I hope you're not lying to me, Rudy."

Phillip dropped his head and dejectedly said, "Don't worry, coach, I'm not."

Kenny explained, "When Eddie was dying he gave me a cross just like that one, and I believe he was trying to tell me something about Father Rudy."

"I see," Phillip replied and some teardrops rolled down his cheeks. "I feel so awful about what happened to Eddie!"

Kenny was not going to relent until Eddie's murder had been avenged, and he continued, "Here's the way I see it, Phillip. Concerning the scumbag who was blackmailing you, that's no longer my business. But since you knew about that murder and you didn't come to me, or the police, then you've been concealing evidence of a crime and protecting a criminal. Do you agree with me?"

"Yes," Phillip replied, then he asked, "Are you going to call the police?"

Kenny said, "You can make the situation worse, or you can make hopefully make it better than it is now. We should do that, shouldn't we?" Kenny asked. "However, since you didn't know about the blackmailer's murder until after it happened, you're a victim of circumstance and you've already told me Father Rudy has an airtight alibi."

Phillip wiped at his eyes and said, "But I think he was involved in Eddie's death."

Kenny exclaimed. "Okay, but we need proof or he's going to get away with it."

"Fair enough." Phillip replied dejectedly, "What do you want me to do?"

Kenny held out his upturned hands and said, "I think you should talk to the police and figure it out."

"Okay," Phillip replied in a hushed voice. "All right, I'll do it."

Chapter 27

On Monday afternoon just past four o'clock, Kenny strode towards the slender blonde clerk laboring behind the Budget Rental Car counter at the Hailey Airport in central Idaho. Politely but to get her attention Kenny plopped his paperwork onto the countertop. He read the nametag on her blouse, Ursula.

Ursula looked up, smiled at him and asked, "How was your flight, Mr. Brown? Did Horizon Airlines treat you well?"

Kenny scratched at an itch under his hunter-green wool slacks and oil black sweater. He was holding his ski jacket and he placed it on the counter.

Eventually, he replied, "Yes, thank you."

Minutes later he was heading northwest on Highway 75 towards Sun Valley, Idaho. He bid farewell to the setting sun as it went down in a radiant bath of tangerine and watermelon hues.

Patiently, he steered the vehicle along the crusty roadway and kept far behind the rumbling, mango-colored snowplow clearing a path ahead of him. The divorcing clouds had dumped a moderate blanket of snow during the last few hours. He saw a couple of early stars glimmering brightly as dusk fell into place. The slightly curvy twelve-mile drive through the Central Idaho Rocky Mountains took thirty minutes. He wasn't in a hurry and rolled down the windows to interact with the cold air.

He turned the car left and headed in the direction of the oldest ski resort in the country, the Sun Valley Lodge, proudly built in 1936. He pulled the car into the Valet

crescent and tipped the attendant ten bucks to keep it ready. By quarter after five, he was unpacking his overnight bag in one of the hotel's exquisitely designed rooms. He removed his boots and socks, and the beaver-colored carpet was exceptionally thick. He raked his toes against the therapeutic weave.

Kenny took a quick shower, shaved and changed into fresh underwear and socks before brushing his teeth. He elected to wear the same clothes he had arrived in, but he put on his elk-skin boots and placed his black loafers next to the bed.

At a quarter-to-six, he was back in the rental and heading west again. Cautiously, he drove along the winding road before making two turns and reaching his destination, 376 Oxbow Lane.

He parked in front of the bulky three-story cabin and lectured himself gently. "Just do the right thing and be real."

Kenny stepped out of the car and marched through the crunchy snow. He was pleased that he had purposely left his briefcase in the hotel room because the Blum triplets and their parents didn't need to see more glossy bits of information about McMillan College. The Blum family wanted to meet him in person before deciding whether to visit the school in two weeks.

Kenny bounded up the pinewood steps and peeked into the living room. It was empty except for the blazing fire popping in the hearth. He knocked on the hefty door and the massive man who had sired three of the best athletes in Idaho met him in the doorway.

Kenny smiled at the husky gentleman that looked like the former Oakland Raider's great quarterback, Ken Stabler. He said, "Hello, Mr. Blum. I'm Kenny Brown."

The good-natured Larry Blum stuck out his big right hand and locked grips with him. “Coach Brown, it’s damn good to meet you. Come inside...you’re the only head coach that’s been on time.”

He followed the lumberjack through the vacant living room and into the kitchen. He paused and looked at one of the classiest middle-aged women he’d ever seen. She was tall, just a couple of inches shorter than he was, with mocha skin and a womanly figure. She had a pretty face and shoulder-length jet-black hair. She was dressed in a pair of faded blue jeans and a violet turtleneck. She wiped at her stained apron and walked across the country-style kitchen. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Coach Brown. I’m Carol.”

They shook hands and the tempting aromas in the air caused his stomach to growl with anticipation. They headed to the family room downstairs. He was in the third position behind Carol and Larry. He followed them into a broad room that held a well-used ping-pong table with a ring of sofas encircling it.

Like a small but disciplined military regiment, a trio of healthy young lads stood up and snapped to attention. Kenny looked at them and was introduced from left to right, to Parker, Eric, and Chris.

Instantly, even though he’d already watched each of their personalized biographies on videotape, he saw that Parker was the spitting image of his mother; almost 6’3 and still growing. Eric was an equally attractive blend of his parents and the best-looking boy of the bunch with tan skin, blue eyes and tightly curled, dark hair. He was shorter than Parker and returned his gaze. The last son, Chris, seemed to have been cast from nearly the same genetic blueprint as his father. He was a Caucasian giant tipping the

scales at 257 pounds. Carol handled the formalities in a reserved manner and Kenny understood who was in charge.

They chatted briefly before Carol suggested they make themselves comfortable upstairs in the warmth of the living room. Shortly thereafter, they relaxed in the plump chairs and Larry toasted hot ciders with him while the boys evaluated him with searching glances.

Carol sat down on a huge pillow near the fireplace and began the dialogue, “Have you ever been to New Orleans, Coach Brown?”

He smiled. “Not yet, and please call me, Kenny. But...my girlfriend is from Louisiana and I’m going to make it there soon.”

She mirrored his grin and said, “If you’re keeping the company of a southern woman surely you must appreciate good food?”

He nodded and replied, “And good people.”

Carol cracked a thin smile.

Finally, Larry chimed in to stop the building silence. “Kenny, why should my sons attend McMillan College?”

Kenny swung to the young men seated across from him and then looked to Larry. “Like Coach Zanton mentioned when he visited here last month, McMillan College is a topnotch school in a great location. And I’ll do the best job possible to ensure that Parker, Eric, and Chris get a fair opportunity to demonstrate their athletic skills.”

Larry rolled his head back and forth and looked up at the raftered ceiling. “Thank God! I’m thrilled that you didn’t give me some crappy speech about education or racial

equality for our sons! Every single head coach that's been here before you have sounded the same." Larry slapped his right knee and bellowed, "Hallelujah!"

Kenny tried to hold it in, but he laughed, and soon they were exchanging funny stories about their lives. However, even though Carol was putting up an amiable front Kenny realized he had to win her vote. Based on the unfortunate set of circumstances engulfing the football program, he couldn't blame her.

Eventually, Carol got down to business by stating, "Curtis Waters was not a big fan of yours, Kenny, and he thought you should be fired."

Kenny absorbed her statement but her verbal jab hit him hard. He collected his thoughts and hesitated before answering. "Fortunately for me, it was the other way around."

The boys and Larry chuckled, and he noticed that Carol was pleased with his reply. She accepted his words and pressed on, "Kenny, do you have any idea how difficult it was for my husband and I to raise three interracial boys of the Jewish faith here in Idaho?"

Kenny had prepared for that question. He finished his hot drink and set down the glass mug. He leaned forward and stared at her while replying, "Even though I don't have kids yet, I've worked with kids of all ages for several years. I appreciate the tremendous pressure on the parents and the burdens on the kids as well."

Kenny switched his stare back to the boys and said, "The three of you are very special and there have only been a few sets of triplets that have ever played football in the NCAA, and none of them have ever been on the same team at once. Black, white, brown or green, if you do a good job then you'll be rewarded. But if you don't rest assured there

will be ramifications. It's clear to me that the three of you have turned out well. That speaks highly of you and your folks."

Kenny looked at Larry and finished talking, "As far as the Jewish faith is concerned, I was a summer camp counselor at the Jewish Community Center in Oakland when I was in high school, and a lot of my friends are of the Jewish faith."

He hoped that the Blum's could tell he was speaking from the heart. He sat back and relaxed for a moment. The fire in the hearth was getting low. Without being told, Eric got up and stacked some fresh logs onto the flames. He returned to his seat and accepted the gratitude of his parents.

Larry looked at Carol and asked, "How's dinner coming along, honey?"

She glanced towards the kitchen and said, "Two minutes." Then she stared at Kenny and said, "Over the phone, we've talked about the unfortunate death of Eddie Banks, but I would like to ask you a few questions before dinner."

Kenny thought. Brace yourself. Here it comes! He met her firm stare and calmly replied, "Please, be my guest."

Parker, Eric, and Chris sat up, and Larry perked up even more.

Ladylike, Carol realigned her posture, raised her chin and asked, "Kenny, do you have any news about the murder of your assistant coach, Eddie Banks?"

Kenny meshed his fingers and pondered. He understood the truth would set him free, and replied, "The police have concluded that nobody on my staff killed him, thank God. But the case is wide open. We'll have to see who was responsible for his death."

Desperately, but understanding the reasons behind Carol's questions, he prayed that she wouldn't ask him details about Eddie's death. The tension in the air seemed milky and thick.

Larry shot his wife a quick-look, and then Carol asked, "Kenny if you have children of your own someday, would you want them to be mentored by a gay football coach on and off the field, and being exposed to that element in the Men's locker room?"

Kenny was ready for that and replied, "With all due respect, Carol, I'm not a father yet, but I can speak from my own experience." Carol nodded and he continued, "When I was in high school one of my favorite teachers was gay. He didn't care who knew and it didn't matter to me because we kept our bond professional, as it should be." He allowed his words to sink in and stated, "Our differences never drove a wedge between our mentor-apprentice relationship."

Larry cleared his throat and Carol nodded but remained quiet. Kenny rubbed his hands together and kept going, "I've done everything possible during this situation to keep the ship afloat, but I've made some very big mistakes. However, I've never been deceptive or lied to anybody, including all of you."

A short delay ensued, and Larry was about to speak up, but Chris beat him to it. "Excuse me Dad, but I have something to say."

The big lad looked at his father and kept on track, "As you and Mom already know, Parker, Eric and I have been talking about this for the past few weeks and we've made a decision."

Here it comes! Kenny told himself. Please be good news!

Chris revealed, “We don’t care *that much* if one of your coaches is gay. Basically, we just want to play football and earn our degrees in four or five years from an outstanding college.” Chris glanced at everybody in the room and looked to him again while saying, “Coach Brown, we respect your decision about not firing your coach and we know you’re in a no-win situation. Regardless of what the other coaches from around the country have been telling us about the doomed fate of you and your staff, as far as we’re concerned, we trust you.”

Kenny exhaled and replied, “Whew, boy! Am I glad to hear that!” He stood up quickly, shook their hands and sat back down. “As you know, not everybody has agreed with the choices I’ve made, and I don’t blame them. We’ve lost some key recruits and it’s been tough. Just so you know, my decisions were based on the ability of my assistant coach in question to do a good job all the way around, on and off the field. It had nothing to do with me taking a stand for gay rights. That’s not my job at all, and my personal opinions are not relevant about that issue.”

Larry exclaimed, “Good, now that we’ve finally taken care of business, let’s eat!”

Kenny saw the boys look to their mother, but she wasn’t getting up just yet.

Carol asked, “Kenny, can you guarantee that my boys will earn their degrees in four or five years?”

He shook his head and replied, “No. Only they can do that for you.”

Carol smirked. She had thrown the book at him and he felt as if he had passed the test. She smiled and rose to her feet. She strode across the plush carpet and they followed her into the dining room. In a short time they were all seated around the spacious dining

room table. Larry was stationed at one end and Carol at the other. Eric and Chris were seated side by side, and Parker was positioned on his left.

Pungent wafts of steam drifted up from the platters that the boys had put on the table. Larry delivered a righteous blessing of the meal and then all hell broke loose at the dinner table. Kenny watched while the boys piled mounds of Cajun food onto their plates. Before taking their first bite, each of the teenagers guzzled a glass of milk and refilled their containers. He was also famished and dug into his own food like a man savoring his last meal.

After wiping his plate clean, Carol looked at him with a sly grin and said. “Glad you liked it, Kenny. Would you like another helping?”

“Yes, it was delicious. Thank you, Carol.”

She instructed the boys to replenish his plate with food. Her sons obliged and then she handed him his plate and remarked, “Life has a funny way of working itself out. Don’t you think, Kenny?”

Kenny took a bite of tender chicken smothered in spicy brown gravy and rice. He swallowed the tasty food before replying, “Yes it does, Carol. If we’re lucky.”

Chapter 28

On Wednesday night I drove my car into the slanted driveway of Phillip's home in the Berkeley hills, as the BMW's headlights sent rays of angelic light into Phillip's blackened living room announcing my arrival. A steady rain pattered away and drenched everything, and I knew God was thoroughly cleansing things on my behalf.

I slid from the car and slipped on my long mule-colored overcoat. Raindrops pelted my head and when I reached the covered porch my hair was very wet.

I knocked on the door and thought, This gets decided here and now!

Phillip opened the door and I looked at the strong man who had been such a big part of my life for the last several years.

Without hardly any warmth, Phillip said, "Hello, Rudy. You're turning into a wet sponge, get in here."

I stepped into the house and gave Phillip a quick hug. "I've missed you."

"Me too. The kids are with my ex-wife. Let's talk." Phillip said.

After the unexpected emotional display, I discarded my coat into the hall closet and Phillip flicked on a dim light beside the living room sofa. A soft glow of amber shards bounced off the hardwood floor and splintered to infinity as if my feelings were being expressed back to the Lord to share my suffering. I looked at Phillip's silky gray pajamas and was aroused despite the turmoil between us.

I sat down on the couch and gazed up at the man I loved. "Phillip, could you please do me a favor?"

Phillip folded his arms and replied, "Of course, Rudy. Anything you want."

I peered into Phillip's eyes and quietly said, "Take off your pajamas, and prove to me that I can trust you. I need to know that we are on the same page."

Nervously, Phillip asked, "Here? Now, on the floor?"

I nodded and explained, "Based on what's happened lately, I don't trust anyone except God, and I want to make sure that you're not wired or trying to hurt me."

Phillip frowned and slowly removed his top, and then pushed down his pajama bottoms. Phillip stood before me in the rawness of his well-built perfect flesh.

My eyes devoured Phillip's statuesque body and I whispered, "Turn around."

As Phillip rotated, I thought Phillip looked like a supreme battle-ready android undergoing a maintenance inspection before being sent out to war.

Phillip stopped turning and looked down at me. "Did I pass your test, Rudy?"

"Yes." I replied, "But you can stay like that; if you want to?"

Phillip scoffed and I watched intently while he stepped back into his pajama bottoms but remained shirtless. I stood up slowly and examined the lamp, coffee table and end table for a hidden microphone, wire or bug. Feeling satisfied, I returned to the couch and we sat together on the sofa. I reached over with my right hand and touched Phillip on the upper part of his leg. Phillip stared back at me but said nothing.

With an uneasy tide in my stomach, I asked, "Are we going to make it, Phillip? Or, has too much damage occurred for us to be together ever again?"

Phillip chewed on his lip and finally replied, "That depends because I'm not going to live with a liar. Would you?"

I shook my head and responded, "No, and I agree with that. But, I'd like to ask you something first."

“What?” Phillip’s voice elevated an octave or two.

I searched Phillip’s eyes and asked, “Is everything all right between you and Coach Brown?”

Phillip leaned back against the sofa and exhaled a few times, his lips flapping like a neighing horse. When Phillip began talking, I sensed he was fabricating his answer.

Phillip also stated, “I told Kenny that I needed a few days off to handle some important issues of my divorce.”

I clenched my jaw and sat back against the soft cushions of the sofa. Phillip stared at me, while I gazed out of the living room window mindlessly into the concealing night. I turned to the right and adjusted my body accordingly. I stared into Phillip’s eyes and bent forward to kiss him passionately. In the fleeting millisecond when our lips touched I had a tingling sensation and wished we could stay bonded forever. However, after the startling surprise of our physical closeness had vanished, I realized Phillip was going through the motions. The intense love and passion between us were gone.

I pulled away, peered at Phillip and asked, “You’re not coming with me, are you, Phillip?”

With a straight face, Phillip said, “I need some answers.”

“Answers to what?” My body was ablaze in unbridled betrayal by him.

Nervously, Phillip plowed his hands through his hair and asked, “Do you know why Eddie Banks was killed?”

I shook my head and lied, “No. But I’ve heard the rumors about Eddie’s father being heavily indebted to gambling organizations.”

Phillip swiped at the shadowy air and spat, “Nonsense!”

We sat in silence and Phillip asked, “Are you leaving the country, Rudy?”

“A representative from the Vatican contacted me yesterday and informed me that I will be offered a cardinalship by the Pope within the next two weeks. They asked me to keep quiet until everything is made official at the Papal ceremony in San Francisco.”

“Of course,” Phillip’s eyes welled with tears and he gushed, “Rudy, that’s wonderful news!”

“Thank you, my love, and I should have the details worked out within a week.” I rubbed my left eye and asked, “Phillip, are you coming with me to Rome? Yes, or no?”

“When do you need to know for sure?” Phillip replied tentatively.

“How about Sunday, at my chambers?” I asked.

Phillip replied, “Morning, or at night?”

I stood up and said, “Evening would be better for me. Okay?”

With a long face, solemnly Phillip walked me to his front door.

With every step I took, my heart shattered into tiny pieces and littered down upon the horrifically overjoyed skies of hell.

Phillip retrieved my coat, then faced me and asked, “Can I call you tomorrow, Rudy?”

I shook my head and answered, “No, I’ll be out of town for a few days tying up some loose ends and taking care of things...for us.”

“Really?” Phillip countered, “Like what?”

“Wait until Sunday, Phillip, and I’ll tell you everything,” I replied, before slowly striding out of the front door and into the rain-soaked night.

Chapter 29

Minutes after leaving Phillip's home, I stopped my car along the snaking road of Claremont Avenue in the Berkeley Hills. I pivoted in my seat, kicked the door open and got out. The rain poured down on me like damp reminders from the Lord of who was always in charge, but God's wet pounding was nothing compared to the emotional torment ripping me apart from the inside out.

I stomped over to a muddy hillside laden with fat oak trees, poison ivy, and shrubs. For no apparent reason, I began climbing up the mound as if I needed to find something valuable I had lost. Like a crazed gold-digger seeking an evasive fortune, I scrambled up the messy slope but every time I progressed, the grotesque mush would give way and I would slide back down. I became filthier and grimier each time.

Huffing and puffing like a fatigued asthmatic, I reached out and latched onto the trunk of an oak. With mud-cakes hardening around my pant-legs, I pulled myself into the crook of a tree and pushed towards the top. I reached the uppermost foliage of the broad sapling and used my strength to pull up and over the thinning limbs above my head. Like a Sumatra Orangutan poised at a comfortable elevation above the canopy, I perched in the treetops and gazed into the dark foothills surrounding me. Fresh rain fell onto my upper-body, ever-present reminders from God about the omnipresent power looming over me. I wondered about my own sanity and the actual onset of insanity, and I turned my face into the oncoming rain. I opened my mouth as wide as it would go, stuck out my tongue and tasted some of the Lord's free water, his sublime nectar the clear stuff.

Finally, I closed my mouth and swept back the lanky ropes of my dank hair.

I spoke into the night and directed my shouted pleas to the ubiquitous entity I had never actually met. “Help me, dear Lord. Help me, oh most gracious God! I don’t want to take Phillip’s life, but it seems that I have no other choice. Do I?”

I wailed, blurted horrible words, and cried, all the while patiently waiting for a response from God. However, this time I received nothing, no inkling, transmission or urgent message from his Holiness. As seconds evolved into minutes I eventually understood what I must do. The flattening weight of my gut-wrenching decision caused my stomach to bulge with disgust. My overheated brain felt like it was splitting in half and the weird sensation occurred within my head non-stop, like the inherent cell division of a zygote.

Sitting in the tree, I asked God for answers. “Dear Lord, many years ago Yakov abused me. I killed him but you were kind enough to let me escape his evil wrath. What should I do now; flee the country, or make Phillip pay for his apparent betrayal of me? I am lost.”

I clutched at my churning bowels and vomited between my legs. The torrential outpour from my mouth fell towards the ground and splattered against the branches like a discolored waterfall. My body convulsed with each of my nasty hurls and I started dry heaving while making squealing swine-like sounds into the valley of darkness.

After I wiped most of the spewed remnants away from my face, I warily decided to get down from the tree. Unfortunately, I had outsmarted myself like a stranded cat and discovered it was much more difficult to descend from my lofty position.

Seeing no other option available, I shimmied over the branches until I reached the point of no return. Like an experienced gymnast, I held on tight and rolled my limber body over a branch. I hung there and leered at the ground, dangling twenty feet above the sod, as my wet hands began to separate from the slippery bark of the tree.

I closed my eyes, summoned the heavens once again and asked for divine intervention. Mildly comforted but increasingly unsure of the Lord's ability to help me through this awful period in my life, I released my grip on the branch and fell through the gloomy black night. My coattails unfurled around me like a malfunctioning parachute and I plummeted towards the ground like a huge vampire bat swooping in for the kill.

Chapter 30

On Sunday evening before five o'clock, Kenny walked through the front doors of the Washington Administration Building and made his way upstairs. He entered the restroom and washed the mud from his hands. He glanced in the mirror and realized he didn't look so good. His burgundy shirt was wrinkled, and his face looked tired and pale.

After exiting the men's room, he walked into Rebecca Jones' office and said, "Sorry I'm late. It's a mess out there...the rain has been pounding for days."

He watched the President of the college peer at the triangular clock on her desk, and she replied. "That's okay, Kenny because John just walked in as well. I appreciate both of you meeting me here on a Sunday."

Kenny sat down in one of the chairs near her desk and glanced at McDough.

Speaking to both, Kenny said, "Rebecca, John, I want to apologize for my erratic behavior during the past few weeks."

Rebecca shook her head and replied, "Times are tough, Kenny, but I appreciate your words. During the past week, I've been inundated with faxes, emails, video mail, text messages and telephone calls from my peers around the country. Many of them think I'm crazy for supporting you, Kenny. While others are of the mindset that I deserve an award for bravery; it's very unstable ground that we're walking on, gentlemen."

McDough chimed in, "Same goes for me, Kenny, and I'm sorry about cussing you out at the Dallas Airport. I'm ashamed."

Kenny nodded. They resolved their differences and talked for a while. Eventually, Kenny asked, “Rebecca, where’s Percy? Isn’t he supposed to be here by now?”

Rebecca glanced at McDough. Then she looked at Kenny and replied, “Yes, he should have been here fifteen minutes ago.”

Kenny noticed that McDough frowned at her reply.

Then McDough exclaimed, “Oops! I almost forgot. Percy’s not going to be here for another half hour.” McDough downed some of his coffee and gazed back and forth sheepishly.

Rebecca tapped her fingernails on the surface of her desk and Kenny realized she was waiting for McDough to explain his statement about Percy’s whereabouts.

Kenny rubbed his neck and scratched at an itch underneath his buttoned-down shirt. He glanced at McDough and finally asked, “John, why is Percy late?”

McDough replied, “Percy pays the bills, so he can do whatever he wants.”

Rebecca replied, “I spoke with Percy this morning and he mentioned that he was going to take a walk around campus before our meeting.”

McDough set his empty mug on Rebecca’s desk, and said, “I saw Percy about two hours ago. He told me that he was going to pay a surprise visit to Father Rudy. He thought it might be best for him to handle this situation with Father Rudy personally.”

Kenny was puzzled by McDough’s statement and quickly asked, “But the cops don’t want us to get involved with Father Rudy, at all! Phillip is supposed to get Father Rudy’s words on tape to incriminate him, and that’s it!”

McDough glanced at Rebecca and loudly answered, “No, no, no! Wait a minute! I saw Phillip drive into the parking lot before me and I assumed he was here to clean out his personal items.”

Kenny shot a worried glance at Rebecca and exclaimed, “What, John?”

Alarmed, Rebecca snapped a pencil in half and asked, “Kenny, what’s wrong?”

Kenny sat on the edge of his seat and glared at Rebecca with widened eyes. “I’m not sure but something doesn’t add up because the detectives instructed Phillip to stay away from Father Rudy until ten o’clock tonight. Period.”

They both looked at him silently.

“Jesus!” Kenny blurted. He catapulted from his seat and rushed towards the door with goosebumps rising on his skin.

McDough and Rebecca shot up, and McDough yelled, “Kenny! Kenny!”

Kenny ran. He didn’t look back, but he shouted a stern reply over his shoulder.

“I’m going to the church! Call security...now!”

Chapter 31

Unbeknownst to the few people praying in the church, I was standing with Phillip in my chambers and attempting to gauge his level of honesty. Feverish with the menacing ire of a hot skillet, I locked the side door and slowly spun around to face the man I had once loved more than anything. Phillip removed his Muslim skullcap and gently placed the circular item on my desk. Phillip watched me silently as I donned a lemon-yellow gown with green piping and a lavender scarf.

After dressing, I picked up a matchstick from the mantle above the fireplace and then lit four candles, one in each corner of my office. When finished, I blew out the match flame and turned off the lights. I tossed the charred remnants of the spent matchstick into the cold hollows of the stone hearth and blew some dust from my fingertips. To me, the gallows of the drafty fireplace was much warmer than my destroyed soul.

I brought my gaze upwards, looked at Phillip and understood that our trust had disappeared forever.

I said, "Phillip, I love you, but you've turned against me. That much is clear."

Phillip wiped his huge hands on his sweater and defensively replied, "You gave me no other choice, Rudy, because you implicated me in Dante's murder at the zoo."

I shook my head and stated, "I totally disagree, and as you said to me before, 'we're both guilty.' But anyhow, you've stabbed me in the back, Phillip, and I can never

forgive you for that. You fail to understand the simple fact that I killed only for us...*for us*...and not just for my own selfish reasons.”

Phillip was mute, and so I lamented, “I’ve noticed undercover police following my every move. Don’t deny it, Phillip, because you’re a terrible liar.”

Clearly, Phillip was becoming angry and his lips trembled when he replied, “We are the criminals, Rudy! We committed the crimes! We’re guilty! You and me both!”

“Keep your voice down, Phillip!” I ordered harshly.

I marched over to an antique table and rummaged through a stack of papers. I slid open a drawer, then turned to my right and glanced back at Phillip.

I allowed my lips to part as if I was smiling, but inside I was irate. In a dry and reserved saddened tone, I said, “I had great plans for us, Phillip, wonderful images of you and I enjoying our lives together in Rome, and throughout the world.”

Phillip balled up his fists, closed his eyes and replied, “What did you expect me to do, Rudy, leave my children?”

I braced myself and replied. “Don’t blame me for that, Phillip! But, you could have come with me if you really wanted to! Do you honestly want your children to be shuttled back and forth between you and your ex-wife for the next twelve years?”

Phillip brought his hands up to his face and dabbed at some teardrops. Crying, he asked, “How would that have been possible, Rudy? How?”

“Anything is possible, Phillip if you want it bad enough.” I continued to occupy myself with contents in the drawer and answered Phillip’s question with absolute sincerity. “Tonight, our fate has been sealed by the miscalculation of your errors.”

Phillip moved closer to me, and I noticed a tectonic shift within my own soul into the monster of a man I knew too well.

Phillip tried to regain his composure and asked, “Rudy, are you behind Eddie’s murder?”

I harrumphed quietly, opened my eyes and gazed at the flickering shadows dancing on the rocky walls of my chambers. The fleeting silhouettes skipped about the room like demons and sneaky Goblins. Long ago after killing my brother, Yakov, I had a sickening revelation that my life was never going to be fair or balanced. A solitary teardrop and its dewy twin escaped from the corner of my right eye and tumbled down my cheek.

Phillip was agitated by my silence and hastily said, “Answer me, Rudy, because I can’t be involved with somebody I don’t trust with all of my heart!”

I frowned and shook my head. Discreetly without Phillip knowing, and with great sadness gnawing on the frayed sinews of my heart, I wrapped my fingers around the cool ivory handles of the two bronze daggers in the drawer. Casually, I slipped a knife into each of my hands and folded my arms into the sagging folds of my billowy sleeves. I stood with my back to Phillip, uttered a quick prayer to my Lord and asked to be forgiven for my upcoming awful deed.

After praying, I whispered, “Trust your heart, Phillip, and come with me so we can be together in peace in a different part of the world...”

With a quivering voice, Phillip replied, “Even though I want to be with you, Rudy, I can’t do it! My kids come first! You must understand that?”

I resigned myself to the worsening situation and spun around. I looked at

Phillip's forlorn face and quietly remarked, "I appreciate your honesty, Phillip, and you should know that God has infinite amounts of forgiveness in his heart."

Phillip had a crinkled brow and a confused look on his face. I observed Phillip's nervous fingers and elusive eyes. I eased towards Phillip with my dagger-filled hands tucked into the sleeves of my robe like a serene Tibetan Monk welcoming a guest.

Phillip asked, "Rudy, where are you going to go? What are you going to do?"

Conniving and ruthless, I inched closer and stopped directly in front of Phillip. The loving man Phillip had fallen in love with, and the good person everybody else referred to as 'Father Rudy' had vanished forever in a combined breath of life and death.

I had evolved into a stranger unto myself, with no beginning or end. My exodus was final, and my journey into the desolate regions of my isolation commenced.

I stared up into Phillip's eyes and replied, "Don't worry about me, Phillip. I will be fine. Please...just hug me...and say goodbye."

Phillip opened his arms for our final embrace and whispered to me, "I will always love you, Rudy." He squeezed me and said, "The police are coming for you tonight, Rudy. They wanted me to trap you in your own words. I'm sorry."

As I felt Phillip's muscular arms around me, remorsefully, I responded, "I know, my love. But don't worry about that now. Farewell, Phillip. I love you."

I felt as if Phillip's tender embrace touched the last microscopic piece of my disintegrated soul. For a moment we swayed back and forth like amiable lovers.

With teardrops of broken love and pure anger rushing down my face, I unsheathed both of my hidden daggers. I clutched the grips of the razor-sharp knives and drew back my elbows. Just before I thrust the pointed blades into Phillip's abdomen with all my

raging might, I looked at the glorious painting of Jesus on the wall behind my desk and begged out loud, “Help me, dear Jesus! Please! Show me the way!”

Chapter 32

With salty perspiration covering his body and face, Kenny dashed across the soggy grounds of the campus like a man running for his life. As he neared the southwestern corner of the church, he planted his right foot and reached out with his left hand to grab onto the edge of the stony building. He held on with the tip of his fingers and his surging momentum caused him to skid as he swung around to the left.

A spraying rooster-tail of muddy water went reeling. He stumbled forward and his scurrying hands immersed in the damp green turf in front of the cathedral. He regained his balance and thought. I can't afford to be late this time!

Kenny flung the doors open and bounded inside. He ambled through the glimmering foyer and was relieved to see Percy stooped over while talking to an elderly couple at the far end of the church. They were about forty yards away from his position and to the left of the sparkling center aisle. Percy was dressed in a wheat-colored funnel-neck sweater and dark pants.

A chilling and terrifying knee buckling cry of agony boomed throughout the innards of the church and seemed to bounce around the building like a stray racquetball. Kenny froze in his tracks with his mouth agape and his arms flexed in a defensive position. He saw Percy flinch and back away from the direction of the shocking sound.

The old couple quickly turned around without saying goodbye to the stunned billionaire and moved down the center aisle in a hurry. They put their heads down and

whisked past Kenny without uttering a word. Even though he was drenched in his own sweat, his tongue was bone dry and his feet like they were stuck in quicksand.

He licked at his lips and forced one word out of his chalky mouth. “Percy!”

Instantly, Percy realized he was in the building as well. Before Percy could answer, a great crashing sound emanated from the right side of the church. The bulky door concealing the priest’s chambers swung open and an eerie silence sucked every bit of life from the air.

Kenny watched with obscene fascination as Phillip lurched into the main annex of the church. Phillip was obviously in the wicked throes of critical pain and had a horrific pair of reddish wounds climbing up the front of his torso. From the massive gash on the left side of Phillip’s belly, a river of dark red blood poured onto the marble tile.

Like a fatally wounded wild animal, Phillip bleated, “Eeeaaaghh!” And then he collapsed onto the front pew, his forehead slamming onto the wooden bench.

Percy exclaimed, “Oh God!”

Kenny saw Percy move towards Phillip with cautious but quickening steps. He glanced at the doorway where Phillip had staggered into the church. Father Rudy emerged from his sanctuary with dripping stains of Phillip’s blood covering his regal looking but the completely unholy gown. The priest had a bloody knife in each of his hands and a crazy scowl stretched across his face like warm taffy being pulled apart from both ends.

Kenny tried to move, but his feet wouldn’t budge, and he shouted, “Watch out, Percy!”

He watched with fright, as Percy finally noticed the maniacal priest coming his way. They were about fifty feet apart and evaluated each other like nature's most simplistic predator and prey.

Kenny knew that Percy wanted to help Phillip and attend to his needs, while Father Rudy totally ignored his former lover altogether. From his location, Kenny realized Father Rudy was huffing as he'd just run a marathon. Kenny spun around and sprinted towards the right wall of the church. His thumping heartbeat pounded against his sternum as if there was a tiny man within him attempting to bang his way out. He stopped in front of an armor-plated knight and reached for the antique battle-ax in its hollow metal hand. He tugged at the ax, but it wouldn't come free. Panicked like never before and nearly blind with fear, Kenny jumped to his left and yanked on the weathered crossbow in another knight's hands. The polished medieval warrior toppled forward and crashed to the floor as Kenny spun away and ran back towards the center aisle of the church.

The priest began marching towards Percy like a guiltless stalker tracking its quarry. Percy finally got his appendages moving and started running away from the deranged servant of the Lord.

Kenny watched the terrified billionaire booking down the center aisle as fast as he could go, but Percy was losing the race against the mercurial priest.

Kenny struggled with the bulky object in his hands and watched Percy sprint down the marble lane.

The billionaire glanced at him and noticed that he'd taken up with a weapon.

Percy shouted a direct order. "Shoot him, Kenway!"

Frantically, and with beads of sweat dripping from his face, Kenny loaded the rusty, square-tipped bolt onto the wooden stock of the ancient crossbow. With trembling hands, he pressed the slim quarrel into the recessed arrow groove and notched the taut bowstring into its firing position. Kenny raised the weapon up to his right cheek and squinted. He closed his left eye and focused on the priest. He saw the aviator tails of Father Rudy's lavender scarf trailing behind him as he chased after Percy.

Kenny tilted his head to the left and yelled at the priest. "Stop, Father Rudy! Stop or I'll shoot!"

Without missing a beat, Father Rudy angled left and made a sharp turn down the middle row of the pews. Kenny was shocked and his legs turned to rubber when Father Rudy suddenly galloped towards him with a sinister look in his eyes.

Percy stopped running as the priest rapidly slithered between the padded benches. Kenny watched Father Rudy coming his way and for a flicker of time he thought he was hallucinating and crumbling under the pressure. However, he came to the cold realization that Father Rudy wasn't going to back off. He fortified his courage and bent his knees to steady himself.

He watched the dagger-wielding priest charge at him and felt sick to his stomach, as tides of wretched bile crept up in his throat.

Percy barked another order one final time. "Damn it, Kenway! Shoot him!"

The crazed vicar raised his left hand and threw a dagger at Kenny. He tried to move out of the way, but the hurtling knife streaked through the air and grazed his scalp above his left ear. It clanked against the wall behind him and rattled onto the floor.

Kenny winced and sucked in a quick breath as his own blood trickled over his left ear and down his neck.

He aimed the crossbow at Father Rudy and mumbled, "Please forgive me, God!"

Kenny squeezed the copper trigger with his right index finger and the bowstring reacted like a sling, sending the antiquated bolt through the holy church air. The spiraling bolt struck Father Rudy in the bony plate of his chest. Kenny heard the priest's breastplate crack apart from the incredible impact. Father Rudy jerked backward and was lifted from his feet like a launching kite. With spread-eagled arms, he hovered in the air as if possessed by a demon. He fell forward and landed on the nock of the projectile with a revolting thump and splat. The solid tip of the bolt pushed through his body and reappeared beneath the backside of his gown like a miniature tent stake.

Kenny observed the fallen priest for a moment, then closed his eyes and set the crossbow on the floor. He darted down the right aisle to help Phillip. When he arrived at Phillip's crumpled body, he realized that Phillip was already dead.

Phillip's lifeless body lay partially upright against the bench and Kenny guided his corpse into a prone position. His eyes filled with tears as he checked Phillip one last time for any signs of life.

Kenny whispered, "You tried hard to be brave, Phillip. I'll tell your children that."

He turned his head to the left and watched Percy edge down the narrow lane of pews towards the felled priest. He saw Percy eyeballing the skewered man of God suspiciously. When Percy arrived at Father Rudy's body, he stepped over the dead man and repositioned himself in the far aisle. He saw Percy stick out his left foot and kick at the chipped dagger in Father Rudy's right hand. Percy failed and tried it again.

The priest raised his head from the marble floor and then stabbed the dagger into Percy's left foot.

Percy screamed in shock, "Ohhhh!" and fell back onto his haunches.

Kenny sprinted towards them and watched the evil scene unfold.

Unevenly, and like a spooky resurrection of a devilish being, Father Rudy rose to his feet and wobbled momentarily. With each end of the bloody bolt protruding from his bloodstained chest and back, the stubborn priest glared down at the stricken billionaire and lifted his knife into the air again.

Kenny took a few more strides and then dove headlong at the priest. He latched onto Father Rudy's armed wrist and tackled him with savage ferocity. They rolled onto the slick floor and suddenly Kenny found himself beneath the homicidal priest. He rolled to the right and narrowly avoided the plunging dagger from the priest. He struggled with Father Rudy and deftly wondered how any man could become so murderous and vengeful. He was curious about the events in Father Rudy's life that led him to this point.

As Father Rudy was about to assault him again, Kenny grimaced and reached up with both of his hands to grab the vane of the weathered bolt. He gripped it and snapped off the last few inches of the slim bolt. Kenny reared back his right hand and jammed the splintered stalk into the priest's unguarded neck.

Father Rudy contorted as a jet of blood spewed from the puncture wound in his neck. He toppled to the left and dropped the dagger onto the floor. Kenny snatched it up and quickly rolled out of the way.

Father Rudy remained still, and a pool of blood oozed around him.

Gingerly, Percy stood up, looked at him and said, “Oh my God. Thank you, Kenway. You saved my life.”

Kenny didn't reply but they embraced for a quick moment.

After releasing each other Percy limped towards the front door of the church.

Percy looked back at him and asked, “Kenway, are you coming with me? I can hear Rebecca and McDough outside?”

Kenny shook his head and exhaustedly replied, “Give me a minute...”

From off in the distance, Kenny discerned the wailings of police sirens and ambulances speeding their way. Spent, sweaty and bloody, he sat down on a pew, placed his elbows onto his thighs and rested his chin on his knuckles. Mindlessly, he began sorting through the incomprehensible deceit and insanity of the past few weeks. Resolutely, and for the time being, he simply couldn't cope with anything else.

Chapter 33

I stayed there unmoving, with my head bowed and kneeling before the infinite greatness of God after presenting my case. I had finally finished my telling Him the story of my life since that traumatic night long ago when I had killed my brother, and up through the time of my awful death in His church.

The Almighty had asked me to do so for Him, to try and justify my belief that my spirit and soul were worthy of joining Him in eternal heaven. I had no concept of how long I had been there before God, recounting every important detail of my life, as I had honestly known it to be since that awful night when I had killed my childhood brother.

The magnificent light emanating from his Holiness blinded me even though my eyes were shut. His brightness, purity, and sheer unequaled brilliance of love and tenderness overwhelmed me. The Lord's shining presence enveloped me in a cradle of hope, in lieu of my despair that my spirit and soul would be cast into Satan's Lake of Fire upon His final judgment of the way I had lived my life for Him.

"Please, stand before Me, my son," God spoke in a deep warm tone after I had told Him everything and had nothing more to share with Him.

Fearful and unsure, but ever hopeful that the Lord's incredible forgiveness would allow me into The Kingdom of Heaven; I rose to my feet and slowly opened my eyes. God was forever taller than any building and broader than any mountain range I had ever seen. I began to cry in huge quantities as never before.

Finally, I truly understood the incredible beauty and grandeur of the Lord. I was much smaller than anything I had ever imagined, and God was everywhere in omnipotent lighted splendor. He was a lovely sight to behold and His marvelous radiance inspired me to the core.

As if God wanted me to see the innocent beauty of who I once was back on earth, I looked down at my hands and nearly crumbled from the absolute shock of what I was witnessing.

With kind soothing words, God began speaking to me without a hint of disappointment or anger in His powerful voice. However, I hardly heard a word of His glorious talk because I was stunned beyond the ability to function in His true presence and boundless display of loving wisdom.

Slowly rising and reflecting before me, a joyous image of a young and happy dark-haired boy replaced the greatness of God. An incredibly wonderful feeling filled my spirit and overflowed the cup of my soul. Mesmerized, I gazed unto myself as a young child and watched a thrill-seeking boy play without a care in the world, pure joy.

Ethereal teardrops spilled down my ghostly face.

Soon, God disappeared from my scope, the image of the beautiful boy I had once been, eventually vanished, and I tumbled into a freefall of eternal darkness.

Chapter 34

Nine months after the death of Phillip Zanton, and on the first Saturday night in September, Kenny stood in the locker room beneath Bunker Hill Stadium with his entire team and coaching staff. He prepared to address his team before their opening game.

He glanced around the red-carpeted room and smiled at some of the young athletes who had shown their faith in him. The navy-blue lockers sparkled, and he truly sensed that his untested team was ready for their initial football game.

He looked at the Blum triplets, then grinned at all ninety players and proudly said, “Buckle up, gentlemen, and I’ve only got a few words for you.”

Each player donned their helmets and snapped their chinstraps into place. Kenny admired their uniforms with the college’s American flag logo plastered on each side of their helmets, and their silver pants and blue jerseys, with red and white shoulder stripes.

Kenny motioned for his assistant coaches to stand beside him.

When his staff had settled in, he began, “Gentlemen, we’ve been through a lot together and thank you for always believing in this fine college. We’ve endured a great deal of turmoil since late last year, but you never gave up on us.”

He looked at his newest pair of assistant coaches that he had hired in April and said, “You’ve also welcomed our new coaches with open arms, and in return, they’ve been positive and utterly professional with you at all times.”

Lou Macaw reached over and handed him a brown paper bag. Kenny thanked him and withdrew its contents. He held up a stack of small circular black decals. Each one of the quarter-sized stickers had the initials EB and PZ imprinted on them.

He displayed the adhesive patches to everybody in the locker room and remarked, “There are 30,000 people in our stadium tonight, and everybody in this locker room has family or friends at the game...including myself.”

His voice began to crack, and he paused for a moment, but his swelling emotions were too thick. He continued, “Eddie Banks and Phillip Zanton sacrificed their lives for us, and I will never forget them! So, the assistant coaches are going to put one of these stickers on the back of your helmet, and please wear it with pride all season.”

Kenny handed a wad of decals to Lou Macaw and Paul Jorgensson, and they passed them out to the other coaches in an orderly fashion. Shortly thereafter each player had a commemorative sticker attached to the lower-right side of their silver helmets.

Kenny looked around the room and stated, “As you know, Father Jack Carr will now lead us in a pre-game prayer.”

Kenny stepped aside and glanced at the stout, gray-haired and middle-aged man in the black suit and white priest’s collar. The new priest shuffled into the center of the circle of athletes. Somebody dimmed the lights and then Father Carr began his religious oration.

A few minutes later, Kenny, his coaches, and the entire team were poised at the northernmost field-level entrance of the rollicking stadium. The players were jumping up and down on their toes like an army of nervous prizefighters before a match. He looked at the powerful lights above the stadium and the burgeoning throng of excited fans clapped

their hands and pounded their feet in anticipation of the college's first football game in thirty years. The raucous pre-game celebration and loud music swatted at his eardrums like one gigantic voice.

Just before the public address announcer introduced his entire team at once, Kenny glanced up to the left at the luxury boxes in the facility. He saw the images of his Mother and Gregory, and those of Athena, Trevor, Marla, and Charlie. Several of his longtime friends were there as well, socializing with Percy, Rebecca, and McDough. He waved at them and smiled.

Just then, a determined reporter stuck his invasive microphone in front of his face and abruptly asked, "Coach Brown! Coach Brown, if you had to do it all over again, would you still have made the exact same decisions?"

Kenny wanted to grab the man's bulky microphone and cram it down the reporter's throat. Instead, he flatly replied, "That doesn't matter anymore. And, if you don't mind, I'd just like to enjoy the game tonight. It's been a long road, thanks."

"Just one last question, Coach Brown!" The reporter beckoned, "Is it true that Democratic Presidential candidate Ferguson Marshall, has recently contacted you about having his son, Jason play for your team next season?"

Kenny knew the truth, but shook his head and sneered, "No comment."

Annoyed with the tactless reporter, he pivoted away and shouted above the din towards his antsy players and coaches. "Let's do it, guys!"

Kenny bounded onto the football field as an ear-splitting roar came forth from the crowd. Their energetic squad of springing cheerleaders executed some amazing cartwheels and flips in front of him, and their patriotic mascot charged out to midfield.

Kenny grinned and allowed himself the opportunity to enjoy the unforgettable moment. He raised his left fist into the night air and jogged across the grass with his players and coaches flanking him. He thanked God and realized it was all right to be happy again.

Other Books by Kurt Bryan

The Game Breaker

Fate Came Calling

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