

Conjesero

The Supernatural Serial Killer

AP Wire

Authorities are baffled by the series of brutal, unexplained murders across the area. In the past several weeks, several bloody attacks have left a number of dead victims slain in a hot spot. Blood-thirsty monster. Detective Kevin Russell has refused to comment on the case.

Detective Kevin Russell on the scene of another mysterious bloodbath.

Double murder at pub

Barre killing spree leaves two men dead in the parking lot of a nearby bar. Although there were no witnesses, many locals are worried about who may be next.

by Carl Alves

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DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate my novel *Conjesero* to my two fantastic boys, Max and Alex, and my wife, Michelle, who make this all worthwhile.

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Chapter I

Paul Richardson walked as close as he dared to the woods. The fog was getting thicker and visibility was diminishing. Behind him came the rustling of feet through leaves and the sound of branches breaking. He spun around and saw nothing. Something back there had moved. What kind of animal would be roaming wildly around here? Maybe a stray cat had wandered past the roads.

Something was lurking in these woods. He was sure of that much, just not how big and menacing it was. He parted branches to get a closer look. He still saw nothing, but felt a presence.

Paul quickly retracted his hands when he brushed up against thorns. Instinctively, he brought his right hand to his mouth but did not taste blood.

He wore a light jacket, his usual San Francisco attire. He felt a big chill, which had nothing to do with the weather. It was a mild night with a slight breeze. Paul zipped up his jacket and tried to get his mind off of things that went bump in the night, and to more important things, such as how he got into this mess. It just wasn't his night. His new Lexus IS350 had a flat tire. He had searched frantically for the road side assistance number, even though he knew it and the owner's manual were on his kitchen table, not in the glove compartment where they were supposed to be. He had weak cell phone reception and non-existent internet reception.

Since his girlfriend, Debbie, was now his ex-girlfriend after their ill-fated date, he could no longer call her. Where had it all gone wrong with her? Oh yeah, it was probably because he was hitting on Debbie's friend earlier at the bar that evening. Paul shrugged. He figured if her friend joined their party, it would be twice as fun. Unfortunately, Debbie did not see it that way and no longer wanted to have anything to do with him anymore. No big loss. It's not like he was looking for a long-term commitment, although it would be nice if she could give him a ride home.

He left Debbie's place shortly after midnight and took a less traveled back road, a decision he now regretted.

Since he had no confidence in his ability to change his own tire, that left him with one option, call his friend, Kevin, a homicide detective in the SFPD. No matter what mess Paul got himself into, Kevin was always there to bail him out. It had been that way since they were kids.

He breathed easier when Kevin told him he would be there soon. The only price he would have to pay was some playful razzing and a couple of Coronas when they arrived at Paul's condo.

Paul had told him more or less where his car was located. Since then Paul had been waiting and wandering when he should have just stayed inside the car. The darkness of the night and the thick fog combined to wreak havoc on his mind. He was hearing and imagining things that were not there. He backtracked to the car, hoping Kevin would get here soon.

Paul was not sure how far he had strayed from his Lexus. He looked at his watch. He phoned Kevin ten minutes ago. He had enough of these woods. He wanted to get back in his car, turn on the radio, and not think about what may or may not be lurking nearby. If he spotted Kevin's SUV, he would get out and flag him.

From his position, he could not see the road, let alone his vehicle. If the woods were behind him, then the road had to be in front of him, or so his logical mind figured.

More branches broke, this time closer. He quickened his pace. For about the tenth time he wished he had a flashlight with only the light from his cell to illuminate the area. This time the heavy thud of feet on the grass pierced the quiet night.

Instead of turning to investigate, he continued walking through the impenetrable fog. He was not sure if his eyes were deceiving him or if he actually saw the shiny metallic silver of his Lexus. He strained to look.

Not only did he hear movement, he felt something behind him. Something large, breathing heavily. He walked faster.

The distinctive silver shine of his car gleamed through the fog like a beacon of hope. The footsteps became louder, and Paul could no longer temper his fear. He ran, the footsteps behind him quickening.

Paul shoved his hand into his pocket, found his bulky key chain with its remote key fob, but had to slow to a trot to figure out which button to press to unlock his car door. He pressed the remote button twice, and miraculously the headlights flashed, indicating the car was unlocked.

He cut sharply to the right, making a break for the driver's side, but tripped and flew face first into the dirt and grass, filling his mouth with soil. He spat and swiped away the grass that clung to his forehead. He propped himself onto his elbows and tried to clear his head. Everything in front of him was a haze. He frantically searched for his keys, but lost precious seconds as he groped before finding them next to his left knee.

With keys in hand, Paul shot to his feet and found himself face to face with a creature more terrifying than anything his worst nightmare could conjure. He gasped before pain racked his body and everything went black.

Chapter II

Kevin Russell pulled off of route 101S. It was nearing one in the morning when he reached Mulberry Street. Paul's Lexus had to be somewhere between Fitzwater and Cotton. Typical Paul, the car would not be equipped with a roadside flare, which would be useful in this dense fog.

Despite the late hour, Kevin was still in the throes of an adrenaline rush after arresting the notorious Hail Mary rapist. The serial killer had pegged seven victims over a six month period before Kevin had become the lead detective on the case.

As he drove, he wondered if his life would be the same after today. Tomorrow, the mayor and police chief would be holding a press conference to announce the arrest. Undoubtedly, they would pat themselves on the back about what a great job they did, and how their efforts would bring peace of mind to the residents of San Francisco. They would take all the credit for his hard work and the risks he took.

He would skip the press conference, claiming exhaustion. He wanted no part of the spotlight or become an instant short term celebrity in today's tabloid society.

Kevin scanned the road. The fog that blanketed the area was lifting.

He turned onto Mulberry and put on his high beams. He slowed his car when he spotted a vehicle just beyond the hill. When he reached the top of the hill, he was sure the car on the side of the road belonged to Paul. He frowned. *Where the hell's Paul?* His friend could be pretty irresponsible, but even he wouldn't call in the middle of the night for a ride and then wander off somewhere.

Kevin pulled over and cut the engine, leaving on the headlights. He reached into his glove compartment and reached for a flashlight before exiting the car. He scanned the area with his flashlight. "Paul! Where are you?"

He stopped walking, waiting for a response, but none came. “Paul!” Complete silence answered him. Frowning, he moved forward

Kevin kept calling out to no avail. His jaw tightened. *Paul should be here.*

Leaves rustled up ahead of him. He narrowed his eyes and shouted even louder. The sounds of movement intensified. As paranoia crept up on him, he removed his gun from its holster. Tonight had an unnatural quality to it, as if anything could happen, no matter how out of the ordinary.

The movement sounded like running. Kevin stopped calling out. Paul wouldn't be running away from him. He picked up his pace.

Whoever he was pursuing gained velocity, so he did the same. Branches broke and bushes separated up ahead. Kevin began to run, but the sounds became more distant. He was in top shape but could not keep up. He broke into a sprint. Eventually, he could no longer hear whoever he was pursuing, so he stopped.

With his hands on his hips, he looked around. He presumed he had been chasing an animal, since no person could have run that fast.

He turned his attention to his missing friend. “Where the hell are you?” he muttered to himself, on full alert now. He did not put his gun away as he walked back to the two cars.

With his flashlight, he examined the disturbed earth from the chase.

He stopped suddenly. Shining the flashlight onto the ground, he saw traces of blood. He knelt and touched it. Definitely blood. He scanned the area and found a trail of blood. He followed the path, which led away from the cars.

The amount of blood increased as he followed the trail. The night was eerie in its silence. The only thing he heard was his own heavy breathing. He tried to calm himself, knowing he worked best when under control.

He gasped when he saw a huddled mass lying on the ground.

He ran toward it. *Please don't let it be him.* The body was lying face forward, and he could not determine who it was.

A car roared by, causing him to turn suddenly, eyes wide with alarm. As gently as he was capable of, he turned over the body. His worst fears were realized when he saw that it was Paul.

He reached for Paul's hand, and his heart skipped a beat as he felt a pulse. He did not move the body. Instead, he reached for his cell phone and called dispatch, asking them to send an ambulance immediately as well as back up. He held Paul's hand. "Hang on buddy." He said a silent prayer, waiting for help to arrive.

Chapter III

What started out looking like a triumphant evening had turned out to be a gut wrenching night for Kevin. The ambulance arrived and they carted him off to the hospital. He followed behind in his car.

It was a good thing he found Paul when he had. The ER staff got to work on him right away, and eventually transferred him to the ICU.

Kevin had a chance to speak with Dr. Wacholz, the ER doc who treated Paul. When Kevin asked if he should receive a transfusion to regain the blood he lost, Dr. Wacholz explained that the body could regenerate this loss of blood on its own over time.

Kevin paced around the waiting room nervously. He tried to get in to see his friend, but a nurse told him he couldn't enter Paul's ICU room until at least the morning. With nothing else to do, he drove back to the crime scene.

Police officers blanketed the area. When he put in the call, most of the available officers available went to lend their assistance. Upon his arrival, Kevin took over the crime scene. He sought out the forensic evidence they had gathered, which included hair fibers of unknown origin found near the body lying in the grass. He gave instructions to have it analyzed immediately. It was clear just by looking at them that the fibers didn't belong to a person. Hopefully Paul would be able to shed some light on his attack when he regained consciousness.

Still fresh in his memory, Kevin tried to retrace the path of the chase. They had trampled grass and unearthed mounds of dirt during the chase. Using his high powered flashlight, he spotted drops of blood on the ground that led him into a wooded area.

He strained his eyes to follow the trail. "Where did you go?" he muttered. He continued to walk past the point where he stopped running, far from the other officers at the crime scene.

Stepping slowly, he tried not to miss any clues. Up ahead, he

spotted something odd. The area was filled with bushes, small trees and high weeds except for a wide opening where the shrubbery was no longer intact.

He pointed his flashlight at the opening and he followed a path through the woods. He shook his head, hardly believing what he saw. Some of the trees and bushes that had been knocked over were quite large. If he had to guess, he would say that the thing that did this damage was anywhere from seven to eight feet tall. The width of the path was nearly four feet. He found a consistent parting of the bushes and weeds further down the trail. The thing he pursued must have moved on two feet. If it traveled on all fours, then it would have to be absolutely enormous to have cleared this type of path. Nothing traveling on four legs could have been that tall short of an elephant or rhino. He sighed in frustration.

After an exhaustive search of the crime scene, he drove back to the hospital, his mind racing a million miles an hour. He should be focusing on the Hail Mary rapist. Tomorrow, he would have to file a report on the case. After the press conference that he would not be attending, he was sure to receive an endless barrage of calls from media sources wanting to get a comment from the man who arrested California's most infamous serial killer since Charles Manson, something he was dreading like a visit to the dentist.

Despite all of that, he could not get his mind off what happened to Paul. His best friend was in a hospital fighting for his life, and he did not have a clue as to what attacked him.

At the hospital, he waited anxiously for Dr. Wacholz, whose shift, fortunately, had not yet ended. A sense of dread overcame him as he shook the doctor's hand.

Dr. Wacholz motioned to a chair. "Please sit."

"How badly is he hurt?" Kevin asked, almost not wanting to know the answer.

Dr. Wacholz had the look of a distinguished gentleman. His graying hair was parted to the side and did not have a hair out of place. He wore a shirt and tie, instead of the blue-green scrubs many

of the other physicians at the hospital wore. His voice was steady and re-assuring. “Mr. Richardson is in stable condition right now.” He smiled. “His condition is not nearly as bad as it initially presented.”

Kevin let out a long breath. He had been prepared for the worst: brain damage, perhaps a coma, or even paralysis.

“Mr. Richardson has suffered a concussion. There are several levels or grades of concussions. He has what appears to be a grade two concussion. This is not nearly as severe as a grade three or four concussion. He also had lacerations to his head and a ruptured spleen that we had to remove. Stop me if you have any questions. We will be running further tests to determine the severity of his condition.”

“Okay, so he suffered a concussion and ruptured his spleen. What happens now?” He had seen people who had received concussions. For some, the effects were minimal and for others, quite severe. Kevin suffered one in a high school football game. Other than vomiting the following day, he had been fine.

“There are a number of symptoms that commonly occur. This depends on the severity of the injury and the nature of the person. Certain individuals are prone to concuss more than others and experience severe effects.”

Kevin took a deep breath, trying to hide his impatience. “Well, what normally happens?”

“The most common symptoms are nausea and vomiting,” Dr. Wacholz replied. “In addition, headaches are quite common. Mr. Richardson is going to require a great deal of rest. I intend to keep him at the hospital for observation for at least a few days.”

“That’s fine. I’ll contact his employers to let them know he won’t be at work.”

“There is another thing that I have observed.”

“What’s that?” Kevin asked

“I believe he may have suffered retro-grade memory loss.”

This didn’t sound good. “Explain please.”

“Retro-grade memory loss refers to the loss of memory of past events. Another type of memory loss involves forgetting things that are currently going on, post the trauma that caused it.”

“I see. The first type of memory lost doesn’t sound as bad. People can always fill you in on things and help piece together your memory.”

“Not always,” Dr. Wacholz said.

Kevin yawned as fatigue hit him like a sledgehammer. He had to look like hell. “When can I talk to Paul? I have to question him.”

“Questions? What is your relationship with the patient?”

“Paul’s a good friend of mine, but I’m also a detective for the SFPD. I’ll be handling this case.”

“I would imagine that you could speak with him later this morning. I wouldn’t think this would entail a police investigation.”

“Why not?”

“Well, by the nature of the wounds, it doesn’t seem possible that a person could have inflicted them.”

Kevin tried to fight his growing weariness. “Go on.”

“He has wide scratch marks that run across his forehead and left arm. We had to put stitches on him to stop the blood loss. Something tore at his flesh in a manner that no person could.”

“Is there anything else you could tell me about his wounds that may help the investigation?”

Dr. Wacholz went back to his chart. “Well the trauma was caused by a massive blow to the head. So, unless we are dealing with a heavyweight boxer, it is unlikely that a person could inflict this wound unless aided by a weapon. We will be performing a CT Scan today on the patient.”

“I’m going to have one hell of a busy day tomorrow.” Kevin looked at his watch. “Shit, I guess tomorrow’s already today. Can you do me a favor and have the nurses keep me posted on what’s happening? I need to speak to him as soon as possible.”

Kevin left the hospital, not sure how he was going to make it through the next twenty-four hours.

Chapter IV

“Come on, Alejandro,” Rosa Marquez said. “If you don’t hurry up you’re going to be late.” They would both be late if he didn’t hurry, and she would catch hell from her boss.

Her nine-year-old son, Alejandro, walked into the kitchen with downcast eyes. He ate the toast waiting for him on the table, but with little enthusiasm. “I don’t want to go to school today.”

It was the same story day after day. Despite her best efforts, she couldn’t help but think Alejandro was on a path of self-destruction. Last week, she had to pick him up from school after he got into a fight, his third in the past two months. She knew it was difficult since her oldest son, Manuel, went away to college and there was no man in the house, but she refused to make excuses. She had to do a better job of disciplining Alejandro, which wasn’t easy, having to work two jobs.

In the mornings, she cleaned the house of a wealthy Silicon Valley executive. Mr. Douglass Friedman was a nice enough man, but he was rarely around. His wife, Isabelle, was one of the most unpleasant women she had ever met. Nothing was ever good enough for Isabelle. If the windows had a spot, then she would have to clean them again. If the armoire had a speck of dust, then she would first have to re-vacuum the area and then do a thorough dusting. Rarely a day would go by where she didn’t re-clean something. Rosa did this without complaint because she needed the money, and the Friedmans paid well.

On a normal day, she cleaned the Friedman house and then took the bus to the Cantina, a Mexican eatery just outside of Chinatown, where she waited tables from noon until seven at night. She hated being away from Alejandro for that long, but that was the only way she could make a living for them.

After her husband, Julio, died six years ago, Rosa struggled to

support her two sons. Julio had owned a small convenience store near the Cantina. His store did well enough for them to have a comfortable but modest living. On a rainy October night, she received a call from the police. Two kids, not even fourteen years old, broke into the store and robbed the place at gunpoint. When a police siren went off, one of them panicked and shot her husband in the chest. He was dead upon arrival at the hospital, shattering her world forever. At the time, Alejandro was only two years and had never gotten to know his father. Manuel was twelve and had been helping his father out at the store. Without anyone to take care of the store, Rosa was forced to sell it at a modest price. In addition, Julio's meager life insurance policy left Rosa in a bind. After his father's death, Manuel started working after school and full time in the summer. He gave most of the money he made to his mother, only keeping a small portion for himself.

Alejandro finished his toast and orange juice. Meanwhile, Rosa packed his lunch in a brown paper bag.

"Let's get ready for school."

Pouting, Alejandro got up from the kitchen table and put on his backpack. "I don't wanna go, Mama."

He was a bright boy, but lately could not stay out of trouble. Manuel had been so easy to deal with. Although Alejandro's grades were not nearly as good as his older brother's, she knew he was capable of doing better. Whereas Manuel was self-motivated, her youngest son was not. She tried to encourage him as much as possible. When that failed, she used a stern hand. Despite her efforts, the only person Alejandro listened to was Manuel.

Alejandro idolized his brother. When home, he followed Manuel around like a puppy dog. Manuel never discouraged this. He would take his brother out for ice cream and help him with his homework. When her oldest son was around, Rosa could control Alejandro. She couldn't be more proud of Manuel, earning a full scholarship to Stanford University. However, there were times when she wished he lived at home.

“Come on,” she yelled in Spanish. “You know I can’t be late for work.”

Alejandro sulked as he followed her out of the house. They lived five blocks from the Wilson J. Farrell elementary school where he attended third grade. She normally walked with him to school before taking the bus to the Friedman house. Hopefully, Isabelle would not be in one of her foul moods today.

Rosa walked alongside her son. It usually took them ten minutes to walk to school, but today he trudged along slowly. Normally he liked to walk ahead of her and pretend that he was going to school by himself.

As they approached the school, she bent down. “I don’t care what the other boys do. I don’t want you to get into any fights.”

Alejandro stared at the ground.

She addressed him in Spanish, “Listen to me. No fighting. Go right home after school is over.”

“It’s not my fault,” he started to protest.

“I don’t want to hear it. My bus is coming in four minutes. Go to school and be good. I love you, Alejandro.”

“I know, Mama.” He did not like to disappoint her, but he wasn’t going to back down from anybody. Manny never did, and neither would he.

His mother kissed him on the cheek and left to catch her bus. Before he got to the school’s entrance, he ran into two of his friends.

“Hey, Alex,” Jorge extended his hand.

Alex slapped his hand down on his friend’s hand. His mom told him repeatedly that Jorge was a bad influence, but Jorge was his best friend.

If she knew about Saleen, she would be even more concerned. Saleen extended his fist, which Alex smashed with his own fist. “Check out what I got, man.”

Alex's eyes lit up. "What is it?"

"Let's go where nobody can see us," Jorge said.

They walked to the back of the school. Saleen pulled out what appeared to be a comb. He flicked it, and a blade popped out. He moved the switchblade knife from one hand to the other.

Alex gasped. "Where'd ya get that?"

Saleen glared at him. "Keep quiet. We don't want no teachers coming back here. My cousin gave me it. You like?"

"I don't know, man," Alex said. "They catch you with that and they'll kick you out of here."

"Nobody's catchin' me with nothin' as long as you keep your mouth shut."

"So what are you gonna do with it?" Alex asked, his voice barely audible.

Saleen slashed at the air. "This is for Terron. He comes after me, and I'll mess him up."

Alex and his friends had been feuding with another group of kids at school. It started as harmless fist fighting. Now, it didn't seem so harmless. Alex did not want his friends to think he was a wimp, but the switchblade spooked him.

"Put that away. Let's go before the teachers come looking for us," Alex said.

Saleen slid the knife into his pocket.

As they walked into the school building, Alex asked himself, what would Manny do?

Juan Antonio Bojoroquez, the school's janitor, had been standing in the shadows, as he was apt to do, watching the three boys. So these kids think they can play grown up games? He smirked. They had much to learn about the violence and evil that lurked around them. Perhaps someday he would show them first-hand. Seems like they needed to learn a lesson.

Juan Antonio crept back into the building. He lived in shadows.

Nobody noticed him, but he noticed everybody. He did his job quietly and never asked questions. When he moved about, he went unnoticed, like a shadow. He briefly pondered letting someone know what these kids were up to, but dismissed the idea. He had a better way of teaching them one of life's difficult lessons.

Rosa Marquez stepped off the bus and hurried to the Friedman house. She was late because the bus was behind schedule. Not her fault, but Isabelle Friedman would hear none of that. She did not tolerate lateness.

Rosa hurried to the garage and used her code to let herself inside. She hoped Mrs. Friedman was not around and she could start cleaning without being noticed.

"Rosa, is that you?" Isabelle called out. "Come over here and sit."

Rosa was prepared to be scolded.

Isabelle sat on her black leather sofa concentrating intently on her massive television that hung on the wall of the family room. It was one of those fancy ones that curved outward. Mrs. Friedman did not look up at her. "Sit down and watch this."

Rosa sat on the leather sofa adjacent to Isabelle.

Isabelle glanced at her. "They finally caught that son of a bitch."

The television showed a press conference where the mayor of San Francisco was speaking. It took Rosa Marquez a couple of minutes before she realized they had arrested the Hail Mary rapist, who had been terrorizing the city for months. The mayor talked about the diligence of his office and their participation in this arrest. He spoke of how the citizens of his great city could feel safe as they walked around at night. Order had been restored, and the mayor said he would see to it that this man was punished to the fullest extent of the law.

"That is absolutely wonderful." Rosa made the sign of the cross and thanked God. Like most people she knew, she had been

following the case closely and was fearful she might run into this killer.

“The man’s name is Ray Holman.” Isabelle spoke in an icy voice. “I hope they kill that son of a bitch. What took them so long? He raped and killed eight women. They should cut off his testicles and shove them down his throat.”

Rosa stared at her boss. She had never heard Isabelle speak with this much intensity.

A tall and intimidating looking black man identified as Captain Lawyer Bishop spoke on the television. He had a surprisingly soft voice. “There are several people that are not here who were mostly responsible for this significant arrest. A number of people put their own safety on the line in order to bring the suspect, Ray Holman, to justice. We owe these individuals an extreme debt of gratitude. There were a number of good police officers involved, but I want to single out two individuals. Unfortunately, they could not join us here today. They are Detectives Kevin Russell and Rita Tedesco. These officers showed the type of courage and valor that makes this city great.”

The television showed pictures of the two officers as the chief of police spoke. Rosa smiled. “He’s not only brave, he is quite handsome.”

Isabelle Friedman said, “I wouldn’t mind him guarding me.”

Rosa got up from the chair and began cleaning. Today was shaping up quite well. Not only was this bastard arrested, but it also provided a diversion to distract Mrs. Friedman from her being late.

Chapter V

With what felt like the weight of the world resting on his shoulders, Kevin drove to his house, set his alarm, and crashed on his bed. Unfortunately he would not be able to sleep long since the sun was already starting to shine on a new day. As much as he needed sleep, it did not come immediately. His best friend was clinging for life in the hospital and he could not even fathom what may have injured him.

Kevin had been a member of the SFPD for nearly eight years and a detective for five. His reputation and status in the force had risen rapidly since his conviction rate was the best in the department.

On a dreary Tuesday morning, his boss, Captain Lawyer Bishop called him into his office.

By Kevin's estimation, Bishop was at least six feet three and three hundred very solid pounds. Bishop had a shaved head and generally sported a mean scowl. Beneath the intimidating exterior was a kind, soft-spoken man.

Kevin liked Bishop on a personal and professional level. Bishop had repeatedly told him his detective skills were second to none, but he had no concept of playing the political game. Fortunately, Kevin's boss was always there to smooth over whatever feathers he ruffled, applying gentle manipulation instead of the brute force that Kevin favored. He would not have gotten anywhere in the department without Bishop repeatedly getting him out of trouble.

"Sit down," Bishop said.

Kevin sat and glanced at one of his favorite photos on the wall. It was a framed picture of his boss standing next to George Foreman. Big George looked small in comparison to Bishop.

"What's going on?" Kevin asked.

Bishop had a grim look on his face. "It's about the Hail Mary

case.”

Kevin raised his eyebrows.

For months, the Hail Mary rapist had terrorized the Bay Area. After his second victim, an aspiring journalist penned this name on the killer upon learning that after the first two victims were raped and murdered, the perpetrator took the victim’s blood and wrote the words to the Hail Mary prayer on the wall.

Kevin thought Bishop would ask him to provide insight on the case. Tensions were high at his precinct. The serial rapist and murderer continued to gain more publicity with each new victim. The lead detective on the case was Rita Tedesco, a fiery Italian in her late thirties. Despite being married with two children, she still found time to attend a mixed martial arts class twice a week with Kevin, who had a black belt in Brazilian jiu-jitsu.

After an especially grueling session a few weeks ago, they went out for a beer at a local tavern where Rita lamented that they were spinning their wheels on the case. She couldn’t find a pattern other than the method of killing with murders ranging from San Jose to Presidio and no consistent age of the victims as they ranged from nineteen to fifty-seven. The victims consisted of two Hispanics, three Caucasians, and two African-Americans. They had no finger prints or other physical evidence.

Kevin explained that without looking at the files, it would be hard for him to comment, but sometimes the best thing you could do is forget everything you think you know about the case and look at it as if it were a new case. ”

Less than two weeks later, there was another rape and murder. For five consecutive days, the headlines of the *San Francisco Chronicle* concentrated on the Hail Mary rapist and the ineptitude of the police force.

In his office, Bishop stared at Kevin. “I want you to be lead detective on the case. Will you do it?”

Kevin stared at his boss wide-eyed. That was hardly what he expected. “Of course I will.”

“I know you have what it takes to solve this case. I have faith in you. You’re going to be given as much backup and support as you need. It’s not all on your shoulders. I want you to consider taking on a partner.”

Kevin shook his head. “You know I work alone. Other detectives just get in my way. Look, I’ll put together a team under my lead.”

Bishop folded his arms. “Okay. I trust your judgment. You’ll have every available resource. Whatever you need, let me know. So what do you think?”

“I’m going to nail this son of a bitch.”

Bishop grinned. “That’s what I want to hear. I wanted to give you this case from the jump, but some other folks around here weren’t so keen on the idea. Now that our backs are up against the wall, they no longer care who gets it done, as long as the perp is arrested.”

Kevin stared into Bishop’s eyes. “I’m not going to let you down. That’s a promise.”

That day, Kevin did not return home until dawn. Time was not on his side. The killer had not struck for three weeks, which meant he would likely strike again soon, since he had never gone more than a month between attacks.

He thoroughly read the case file and spoke to the investigating officers. After scouring the files he studied what little physical evidence that could be found in the forensics lab.

Kevin contacted the victim’s friends and relatives, psychologists, and even priests. He preferred to speak to people in person, so he made appointments to see them.

He knew he wasn’t going to sleep much for the next week or two, and his personal life would suffer. At times he felt that it would be nice to be married and have a family, but now he was glad he had neither.

The one thing he would not let slip was his workout schedule. He trained in mixed martial arts twice a week and played basketball in

a night league. He kept himself in top condition because it helped him to do his job more effectively.

Unsatisfied with the departmental psychologist's profile, Kevin contacted Dr. Kernan, a psychologist who helped him out on other cases, to help develop a profile on this perp.

Kevin paced around the psychiatrist's office. "This doesn't feel right. The report said the perp doesn't have any emotional attachment to these women. They were objects he used for pleasure. I don't buy it. By the way he handled the bodies, it's like he reveres them in his own deranged way. After draining their blood, he didn't throw them away like garbage. The way they looked, I don't know, they looked like family members greeting him as he came home."

Dr. Kernan stroked his beard. "I suspect he may have had a horrible religious experience that caused him to associate this violent act with a prayer. I think your insight about cherishing the women is accurate."

Kevin spent the next two weeks speaking with people who had been close to the victims, and discovered several common threads. The women were well liked, made positive contributions to the community, and served on school committees and other charitable organizations. One volunteered at a hospital, another visited a retirement home, and another ran an after school program for troubled teens.

Despite what was previously theorized, these victims fit a profile. Still, he wasn't satisfied. The rape and murder was some sort of ritual.

Everything changed on a late Thursday evening. The Hail Mary killer struck again, this time a single woman who lived in a small apartment in the Nob Hill section of San Francisco. Kevin had to fight nausea when he arrived at the apartment. It was a blood bath. The victim, pale and ghost-like, was propped in a chair. She had the characteristic puncture wound in her carotid artery. Her left leg was crossed on top of her right one, and her head leaned back in a casual pose.

The evidence suggested he raped the victim first. During the rape, he choked her until she suffocated. After she died, he used a sharp object to pierce her carotid artery. There was a minimal amount of blood surrounding the body, so he must have used a blood transfusion device to transfer the blood from the body of the victim to some sort of basin. He then used a brush that he dipped into the blood and wrote the words to the Hail Mary prayer, clearly and precisely, on the nearest wall.

A touch of sadness overcame him as he examined the victim. In her early twenties with short brown hair and a petite figure, she seemed so innocent.

The rapist left little to trace back to him. There were no hair follicles, articles of clothing, or instruments used in the slaying. The only physical evidence was his semen and skin left on the victim's body.

While gathering evidence, he noticed a monthly church schedule at Our Lady of Good Council parish. Upon further searching, he saw a cross and several rosaries in her bedroom. In the living room was a statue of the appearance of the Virgin Mary at Fatima in Portugal.

Did the other victims have a similar religious inclination? Maybe the perp was striking back at an organized religion that had done him harm.

Kevin stared at the corpse. The lack of blood surrounding the body was uncanny. The person committing these acts was no plodding amateur. He had to have access to precise instruments and experience drawing blood. A hospital employee immediately came to mind.

Kevin followed up later that evening and found that his hunch was right. All of the victims were active members of their respective church groups.

He cornered Rita Tedesco at the station. "I think I finally have this guy figured out. I have to nail this bastard soon because I...I can't live with another woman having to die like this. It won't

happen on my watch.”

Rita finished her cup of coffee. Deep in her tired eyes there was a gleam of excitement. “Then you need to come up with a game plan. Tell me how you think he does it.”

Kevin took a deep breath. “Okay. Our guy goes to a church and carefully observes the audience. Maybe he gets information about different church groups, possibly even volunteers. He tells them he recently moved into the area. He used to be active at his old church and would like to help in any way he could. That would make it easy for him to get close to these women without them suspecting a thing.”

“All right,” Rita said. “We need to talk to the ministers and priests of the churches the victims attended. Gather a list of the people who participated in the committees and church groups they were involved with. Then find out if any newcomers became involved with their church around the time of the killings.”

After scouring the various churches and interviewing dozens of individuals over the next four days, Kevin found an individual who fit this description and arranged for a sketch to be made of this man.

He recruited twenty female officers to use as bait. Age, race, and physical characteristics did not matter. Each would be assigned to two local churches where they would frequently attend services. He gave them a sketch of the killer and his psychological profile. Each female officer would report to him on a daily basis. Not surprisingly, Rita volunteered for the assignment.

For the first week, none of the officer’s made a positive identification. Kevin wondered if the killer had moved on to another area or was at a church that they did not include. He was contemplating choosing different churches when at a Saturday Catholic mass, Rita Tedesco found their man.

As Rita explained to him later, the church was less than half full, so it was easy for her to view all of the attendants at the mass. She sat in one of the back pews to make it easier to identify anyone who entered the church. Just minutes before the service was about to

start, a portly young man in his early thirties entered. He had curly black hair and an ungroomed beard. He wore wire rimmed glasses, a pair of black slacks, and a brown blazer. He sat on the opposite side of the church, about a half dozen rows in front of her.

This was the point that she first made contact with Kevin, leaving her pew and exiting the church to let him know she had identified the perp. He told her to go back inside and make herself visible to him.

Rita was an attractive woman, so Kevin was sure the guy would notice her. Kevin got into his car and committed every possible traffic violation in order to make it to the church before the mass ended, praying the priest would deliver a long-winded homily. The parking lot was mostly full when he reached the church. He approached the rear and found that the parishioners had just finished receiving communion. He spotted Rita, but saw no sign of the suspect. His guy had to be inside because Rita would have followed him if he left, so Kevin waited.

He hung around the back of the church trying not to look suspicious. He approached a statue of Mary separated by a railing. In front of the statue were dozens of votive candles.

He was lost in thought when a voice startled him. "Can I help you, sir?" He turned and found a short nun in her early fifties. "You appear to be confused."

He said in a voice that he hoped exuded confidence, "I'm fine. Actually I'm here to see a parishioner of yours. It's official police business." He showed the nun his badge.

"Oh my," she said. "Why I hope everything is all right."

"There's no need to worry. I just have to ask some questions." He pulled out a sketch of the suspect. "Have you seen this individual before?"

The nun went wide-eyed. "No. I do not believe I have. If there is any way I could provide assistance, I would be glad to."

"I'll be sure to contact you if I have any questions. What's your name?"

“Sister Elizabeth.”

“My name is Detective Kevin Russell. It’s nice meeting you.”

“Likewise.”

She left the church.

The mass was nearing its conclusion. The parishioners were in their seats, and the choir was belting out a hymn. The priest told everyone to go in peace to love and serve the Lord. As they exited, Rita moved ahead of the suspect. Kevin took a deep breath. He put his hand on his pounding heart. He had to remain calm.

Kevin, wearing sunglasses and a baseball cap, exited the church and stood by his car trying to look as if he was picking someone up who had just attended the mass. Rita dropped her purse. Kevin smiled as the suspect bent over and picked it up for her. They exchanged pleasantries, and she thanked him.

A hypnotic gaze came over the man. He slowly walked to his car, an old black Cadillac.

Kevin started his car. There were not many people attending church this afternoon, so it would be easy to maneuver through them in order to follow the Cadillac.

He signaled Rita Tedesco on her radio, and told her he was following the suspect. When the Cadillac pulled out of the parking lot, he followed, allowing a few cars in between them. The suspect drove across the city to another parking lot, got out of his car and walked to a row home. Kevin jotted down the address and found a place nearby where he could temporarily park. He pulled out a set of binoculars to get a closer look, but the shades were down.

He sat in his car observing for nearly an hour, but had no luck. The suspect remained inside. Kevin called Bishop to set up surveillance. They were not going to lose sight of him.

After it appeared that nothing was going to happen, he drove back.

Before the night was over, they identified the suspect. His name was Ray Holman. As Kevin suspected, Holman worked in a hospital. He was a nurse at St. Agnes. He had access to the equipment and

had the experience needed to perform these blood extractions in a precise manner.

Over the next three days, they built a profile on Ray Holman. He was at his current employment for the past five years. Prior to that, he had been in the army, serving in Iraq during the war. He had no criminal record. His parents died in a fire when his childhood house burned down. The police found no evidence of criminal wrongdoing.

Ray did not have any friends at work and kept to himself. Few of them had contact with him outside of work. Holman infrequently took days off and often worked weekends. He had not worked on any of the dates of the Hail Mary murders according to the records of the human resource department of the hospital. The evidence was all circumstantial. Kevin needed something more solid to nail him. He contemplated getting a search warrant, but Holman was so meticulous that he doubted they would find anything incriminating in his house.

Rita continued attending the church where she encountered Holman and became involved with some of the church groups. Ray Holman regularly attended mass at Our Lady of Good Council Church, and Rita always sat nearby him. When she attended mass, Rita was always wired and a van full of police officers stood ready nearby. A few days after the initial contact, Holman followed her home. Kevin felt guilty allowing Rita to take this risk, but he would do the same if the situation was reversed.

The cat and mouse game continued for a few days. One week after they initially identified Holman, Kevin asked Rita to make contact with the suspect.

“What do you have in mind?” Rita asked.

“Let’s up the ante and initiate conversation with him. Can you do it?”

Rita agreed, and they came up with a plan.

The following afternoon, she waited in the balcony of the church until he took his seat. Holman looked around for her and

frowned. She left the balcony and took a seat next to him in his pew.

“Hello,” she said.

He smiled but did not respond.

Toward the end of the mass she asked him, “Are you new to this parish?”

“I just moved here from Maryland.” Holman fidgeted and pushed his glasses to the top of his nose.

“My name is Rita.” She extended her hand. Kevin told her not to give a false name since he probably had seen the mailbox to her apartment when he had followed her home.

He shook her hand. “My name is Mark Falcone.”

“It’s nice meeting you.” At the end of mass, she walked toward the exit of the Church. After a few seconds, he followed, and they exited the church, before he left in a different direction.

Kevin was concerned that she scared him off by approaching him.

They would meet again tomorrow and come up with a plan. Just because their man did not immediately strike, it did not mean he would not attack. Holman was meticulous and careful. He would be well prepared, just like in the previous murders.

After showering, he drove to the station. He updated Bishop on the Hail Mary rapist case. His boss looked haggard. The media continued to blame the mayor and the police commissioner. The blame floated downstream to him. He pressed Kevin to arrest the suspect immediately. Kevin convinced him to wait. Catching him in the act would assure a conviction.

Three hours later, right before he was going to pack it in for the night, he received a call from Rita. Despite her calm demeanor, he knew something was wrong.

“Ray Holman just entered my apartment building,” she said.

“Holy shit!” His heart raced into overdrive. “I’ll be there right away.”

He ran to his car. His car screeched as he drove out of the parking lot. He did not fear for her safety. She was more than

capable of handling herself. He wanted to collar Holman. It had become a personal vendetta.

He drove to her apartment in less than ten minutes, much faster than he would have ever thought possible. He tried to remain calm, knowing he would have to have his wits about him to nail Holman.

As he approached her street, he reached for his holster. He pulled his car into Rita's street. As he was about to park, a shot fired and a window crashed just below her apartment.

A frantic Ray Holman raced out of the front door of the apartment building, carrying a medical supply bag. He wore a long brown trench coat. Kevin guessed the last thing he expected was for his potential victim to would pull out a gun and shoot him. The son of a bitch chose the wrong victim.

Not wasting any time, Kevin drove after Holman, who raced down the street and turned the corner. Kevin was hoping to corner the bastard. Holman turned his head and looked at the SUV. He ran to the end of the block and made another left turn. Kevin also turned trying not to flip the vehicle over. At the end of this block, Ray made a right. Kevin smiled. Despite his meticulous preparation, Ray did not properly canvass the neighborhood because this street ended in a dead end.

He encountered a ten-foot-steel fence surrounded by barbed wire. Without hesitating, Holman went for the fence. Kevin stopped his car, leaving the key in the ignition, and went after him. Ray got caught on the barbed wire. Just before Kevin could get a hold of him, he broke free. To avoid getting stuck, Kevin put his jacket on the barbed wire and climbed over at that spot. He jumped from the top of the fence and onto the ground, never leaving sight of Holman.

The chase continued. Although Holman had a sizeable lead on him, Kevin was rapidly gaining ground.

Ray ran for an apartment building and started climbing up the fire escape. Kevin climbed after him until they reached the roof of the building. When Kevin got to the roof, he took out his gun and fired. Ray dove behind a chimney.

He raised the gun and pointed. "There's no way out." He moved toward the chimney where Holman was hiding. "You only have one decision to make. Do you want to make it out of here in handcuffs or dead? Your choice."

There was no reply. He was about to fire another warning shot when Holman darted past the chimney to the edge of the roof. Kevin ran after him. He stood ten feet from Ray who stood at the edge of the roof.

"Don't do it," Kevin shouted.

Holman looked around, blinking rapidly, and jumped. He tumbled onto the roof of the next house located a short distance away.

Kevin shot out like a cannon and leaped to the next roof with a perfect landing, closing the distance with Holman, who was struggling to get to his feet. He sprinted and tackled Holman before he could jump to the next house. The momentum of the tackle drove them forward. Holman's head banged on the roof of the house. When Kevin got to his knees, he glanced at his suspect, who looked out of it. He removed a set of handcuffs and apprehended his man.

Chapter VI

After getting all of two hours of sleep, Kevin stopped by his precinct. His fellow officers stopped what they were doing and clapped. Before he knew it, everyone was clapping. Rita Tedesco gave him a warm hug and a kiss on the cheek. Other officers patted him on the back and congratulated him. He looked like hell and his body ached, but he felt great, even if all this attention was over the top. That scumbag Ray Holman was finally behind bars.

He couldn't stay long, so he thanked his colleagues and apologized for having to leave so abruptly. He promised that before the weekend was over, he would have drinks with them. As much as he wanted to stay, he had to interrogate Holman, then visit Paul at the hospital.

Kevin drove to the prison. Last night Holman had no interest in talking. The evidence was so damning that, other than a confession, there was little he could say that would make a difference.

His initial hearing would be held on the following Wednesday. The court wanted to have more than the normal allotment of time to prepare since this was going to be such a visible trial. The preliminary hearing was a formality. There was no doubt this would end up in a jury trial.

When he reached the prison, the guards led him to the prisoner. Kevin was stunned at the change in Holman's demeanor. His face was animated and inquisitive. He actually seemed glad to see Kevin. Even more amazing was that Holman would not stop talking. During the arrest, he was so tight-lipped. He even waved his right to have his lawyer present. There was no way Holman's lawyer could be on board with this.

"Tell me how the local and national media outlets are portraying me," Holman said.

"So far, there's been little press coverage."

Ray frowned.

“But that’s all going to change after today’s press conference.”

Kevin looked at his watch. It still had not started yet.

Holman’s face brightened. “What about the social media? Are they talking about me on Twitter and Facebook?”

Kevin shrugged. “Beats me. I’ve been busy.”

“I don’t get it. How did you find out about me?”

This was almost an admission of guilt, so Kevin tried to pursue with a line of questioning that might lead him to a slip up. “You got sloppy, Ray. You left me clues.”

Holman looked down at the table, his lips pursed.

“You left behind IV tubing that I was able to trace back to your hospital.” This was a lie, but Holman would have no way of knowing. “Would you like to know which victim we recovered the instruments from?”

Holman did not answer.

“Jane Mitchell, victim number six. Everything was in place like you normally have it, but this time you left behind tubing. You forgot all about it.”

“I don’t use...” Holman stopped himself.

“Ray, you have no shot at winning a jury trial. You might as well tell me about it. I know it was you. You know it was you. You’re just delaying the obvious.”

Holman shook his head. “Last night, if you had a chance, would you have killed me?”

Kevin gazed at him and lied with a straight face. “No.” It repulsed him to talk with this piece of human feces, but if he could figure out Holman’s motivation, it would only strengthen the case. For that, he had to get into Holman’s head.

“Do you believe in God?” Holman asked.

Kevin tried to hide his surprise at the question. “Yes.”

“What denomination?” Ray asked.

“I grew up Methodist.”

“Methodists are pretty lenient. You probably don’t see the need to punish sinners. You may have the badge and therefore are the law,

but I believe in something more important—God’s law. Your badge and gun aren’t as important. Don’t you think?”

“I have an obligation to protect and defend the people,” Kevin said.

“Those sinners had to be punished. Mother knew how to punish sinners.”

“Is that what you did?” Kevin spoke in a soothing tone. “Did you punish the sinners?” He leaned forward and met Holman’s gaze.

Holman waited to reply. “What I did is unimportant. The important thing is that sinners must be punished. You think that I am the sinner. I am righteous and justified in my actions.”

“You broke the law, Ray. You and I both know you did.”

Holman changed the subject and rambled on about different subjects. Kevin glanced at the wall clock. The mayor’s press conference was likely finishing. He would have dozens of messages waiting for him when he got back to his office, but his main concern and the reason he ended the interrogation was because his friend was still laid up in a hospital and Kevin wanted to visit him before things got to hectic today.

Holman pleaded for him to stay longer.

Kevin gave a conspiratorial smile. “Rest easy. I’ll be back soon enough. We still have much to discuss.”

Kevin felt like he needed a shower after leaving the prison. He was unsure of how long he could maintain this sympathy act.

Kevin drove to the hospital. Fortunately, Paul had a single room. He did not want their conversation to be overheard. Right now, they were treating this as a criminal act, not an animal attack.

He walked up to the room and felt encouraged when he heard Paul’s voice.

Paul said, “You know I used to have a girlfriend who looked just like you.”

“Is that right?” a female voice said.

“Yeah, it was tough. I truly loved her, and then one day she left a note saying she was leaving me. The wound that still lingers in my

heart is far worse than those I sustained last night. You can heal broken limbs, but not a broken heart.”

Kevin smiled. His friend may be in a hospital bed, but he was still on the prowl. Kevin peered inside and froze when he saw the object of his friend’s affection. She was stunning. Her face carried an innate gentleness as she tried to hide a smirk.

Kevin stood rooted in his spot, mesmerized as he watched her work. He finally broke out of his daze and walked into the room. “You’ll have to excuse my friend. He’s taken a rather sharp blow to the head and appears to be deranged.”

Paul turned around. “Kevin! So glad to see you. Dr. Davis told me that you dragged my sorry ass to the hospital last night.”

Kevin walked over to his bed. “How you feeling?”

“Better since they loaded me up on Demerol. Do you think they’ll let me take this home, Doc?”

She shook her head. “You can only take it intravenously. But I’ll prescribe you Percocet to help with the pain.”

“Where are my manners? Dr. Davis, this is the legendary, the one and the only, Kevin Russell. He saved my ass last night. If it wasn’t for him, I’d be a dead man.”

Paul was never this light and giddy. It had to be the pain medication.

“My friend exaggerates. I just gave him a police escort to the hospital.”

“Well, I’ll leave you two alone.”

As she was leaving Kevin called out, “Doctor, can I speak with you later?”

“Sure. Just have one of the nurses page me.”

Kevin walked back to the hospital bed. “I was worried about you. You took quite a knock on the head. I wasn’t sure you were going to make it. You look like hell, but in your case it’s an improvement.”

“Thanks. You’re all heart.”

Kevin counted twelve stitches on Paul’s his forehead. He found

out earlier that his friend had a separated shoulder and a ruptured spleen. “I contacted your work to tell them you were being hospitalized. They put me through to Rich somebody...”

“Yeah, I spoke to them about an hour ago. I told them I won’t be in for at least a few days, possibly longer. I hate to skip out since we’re busy now and job security isn’t what it used to be, but I would be pretty useless until I can stop taking the pain medication.”

“Don’t sweat it,” Kevin said. “Forget about work. Just worry about getting better. If they give you crap, I’ll tell them you’re involved in a police investigation.”

“Yeah about that,” Paul said. “What happened when you got there last night? You see anything?”

Kevin shrugged. “I saw you lying face-first in the dirt. Other than that I didn’t see much.”

Paul shifted his eyes nervously. “Oh.”

“Dr. Wacholz, the ER doc that took care of you last night, said you might be experiencing memory loss.”

Paul nodded. “I was talking to my sister earlier. She mentioned things I should remember, but couldn’t. I was racking my brains, but I just couldn’t remember.”

“Do you remember Judy Williams?”

“Long blonde hair, big boobs, tight ass. How can I forget that?”

“At least you remember the important stuff.” Kevin laughed. “Well, I’ve known you since we were little tots, so I can fill you in on what you’re missing.”

“Yeah, that’s good.” Paul paused. “What do you think attacked me?”

“I have no idea. By the type of wound, it doesn’t appear to be a person. I can’t think of an animal in this area that would do that. I’m planning on talking to an expert on Northern California wildlife.”

“I saw it.” Paul stared out the window.

“Saw what?”

Paul turned off the television set.

Kevin waited for an answer. Paul closed his eyes and began to

breathe deeply. He squeezed his PCA pump to give himself another dose of Demerol. Kevin had never seen him act like this.

“What did you see?”

“Before the lights went out last night, so to speak, I got a full view of it. Something was chasing after me, and I stumbled to the ground. When I got to my knees, I got a real damned good look at the thing. It was something from of a movie, except this was no movie. The closest thing I could compare it to is a werewolf.”

Kevin cringed. “What?”

“A fucking werewolf. At least that would be my guess. It’s not like I ever saw one before. Its face and entire body were covered with hair and it was fucking huge. My sense of perspective may have been out of whack, but it looked massive. It had huge paws. Its arms were thick and muscled, and it stood on two feet. If that ain’t a werewolf, than I don’t know what is.”

“Look, Paul, you took a massive blow to the head. You suffered a grade two concussion. By your own admission you suffered memory loss.”

“You don’t believe me, do you?”

“I just think you can’t be sure of what you saw. It was dark and you experienced major trauma. I don’t doubt that you think you saw this wolf...”

“Not a wolf,” Paul interrupted. “A werewolf. Not the same thing.”

“Fine, a werewolf. Whatever. I just don’t think you can definitively say what it was. It could be what your mind wants to believe, and yours got a little scrambled back there.”

“Is that what you think, my mind is scrambled?”

“Well yeah. It did. I’m just keeping it real with you. Now you’re trying to piece everything together.”

“Maybe so, but I know what I saw.”

Kevin heard the desperation in Paul’s voice. He leaned over and put his hand on Paul’s right shoulder. “Listen, I’m going to investigate this thoroughly. I promise you. I’ll find out what

happened, whatever it was.”

Paul spoke softly. “Thanks. You’re a better friend than I deserve. You always have been.”

For one of the few times in his life, Paul was getting emotional. It hurt Kevin to see him this way. “Get some rest. I’ll be back to see you later tonight. By the way, what you just said, keep that strictly between the two of us.”

Paul nodded.

Kevin said goodbye and left. It was hard for him to accept Paul’s tale, but he would keep his promise to his friend.

Kevin stood at the nurse’s station in front of a short, portly nurse. The nametag she wore said Sharon. “Hi, Sharon.”

She jumped back slightly. “Hi.”

“Can you please page Dr. Davis for me?”

“Sure.” Sharon smiled at him.

Within a few seconds, the phone rang and the nurse answered. Nurse Sharon covered the mouthpiece and asked his name. Sharon hung up the phone and told him she would be here shortly.

Kevin walked away from the nurse’s station, his mind absorbed with this whole werewolf business. As much as it hurt him to see his friend in this state, he couldn’t believe this crazy story. With his head trauma, Paul was hardly a credible witness.

A striking figure in green scrubs and a white lab coat stepped into his view. She had long auburn hair that glistened off of her lab coat. A stethoscope dangled from her neck. She had sparkling blue eyes with dancing flecks of amber. Her skin was fair, and she walked with a confidence that he found appealing. He could only imagine how great she looked in non-hospital attire if she could make scrubs look that good.

“Hello, Dr. Davis.”

“Call me Wendy.” She extended her hand, and he shook it. “I never caught your name.”

“It’s Kevin. Thanks for taking care of my friend.”

She smiled. “He’s a riot.”

“You should see him when he’s not loaded on pain killers. You seem to have a soothing effect on him.”

“Thanks. You know, you look familiar. I’m not sure where I recognize you from, but I’ve seen you before.”

He shrugged. “I probably just have one of those familiar faces.” If she turned on a television set this morning, it would have been hard to miss him.

“No. I’ve definitely seen you before. This is going to drive me crazy.”

He was overcome with a sudden urge to ask her to go out with him. He had to fight the urge back, because he was entirely too busy to start a new relationship.

“Try to keep your sanity intact by not thinking about it. I’m a little concerned over Paul’s condition. Is there any chance he might be delusional?”

“It’s hard to say. The effects of a concussion vary. Under extreme circumstances he may experience delusion, but it’s unlikely due to the severity of his concussion. All things considered, it was not that bad based on his MRI results. Why do you ask?”

“Some of the things he was telling me were just...out there.” Kevin was not about to go into the details. “Do you think he should be able to remember what happened to him right before he went out?”

“Once again, that varies with the individual. Sometimes the individual has no recollection of the events leading to the head trauma and may only be able to recall bits and pieces of it. I wish I could give you something more definitive.”

“Well, thanks for your help.” He looked into her eyes, mesmerized. She was both beautiful and intelligent. “Hey, are you...” He was about to ask her if she was free this weekend, but thought better of it. “I may need to question you at some point.”

“Is this business or personal?” she asked with a sly grin.

“Unfortunately business. Official police business.” He flashed his badge.

“I could answer your questions, if you make it worth my while.” She reached into her pocket, pulled out a business card, and jotted her phone number on the back.

“Thanks.” He took the card. “I’ll be in contact.” He extended his hand, and she shook it. As he walked away he scolded himself for not taking advantage of the opportunity to ask her out on a date. Paul wouldn’t let him hear the end of it if he found out. He turned to see if she was still there, but she was gone. He shrugged and headed for the door.

Chapter VII

Manny Marquez placed his bike on the rack. His brain was still on overload after physics. Unlike some of his classmates, he did not pick up theorems, equations, and complex problems easily. He had to work at the problems over and over before he finally mastered them. Nothing ever came easy for Manny since he enrolled at Stanford. He studied more than any of his engineering classmates on his dorm floor. Without that work ethic, he wouldn't get good enough grades to keep his full scholarship, which was why when things got especially difficult, he bore down and worked harder. Some of his classmates got better grades because they were smarter, but nobody outworked him.

It was a brisk afternoon in Palo Alto. He used a steel U-bolt lock to secure his bike, although he couldn't imagine anyone would steal his beat up bicycle that he had been riding since he was twelve. He could have set aside some of the money he made from working in the cafeteria or from the odd jobs that he did in the summer to buy a new one, but if he bought a nice bike, somebody would probably steal it.

After putting away his bike, Manny entered his dorm and checked his mail slot. As much as he liked email, it couldn't beat an actual letter. The only person who ever sent him letters was his brother. He was glad to see his brother's grammar skills getting better. He would fight hard to make sure Alex did not develop poor speaking and writing habits that plagued kids from his old neighborhood. Whenever Alex sent him a letter, he would write back and include the original letter with all of Alex's mistakes corrected.

He closed his mailbox and went to the cafeteria to look at this week's work schedule. He tried to limit his hours to between ten and fifteen a week. The extra money wasn't worth it if his grades suffered. He had been poor all of his life; another few years wouldn't make a difference. He took out a notepad and jotted down his hours.

He requested next weekend off so he could go home. He tried to go home every few weeks. He liked going to a school close enough that he could make it back to the old neighborhood, where he would typically study through most of the day, and at night, hang out with old friends or stay home with his mom and brother.

After jotting down his work schedule, he went up to his third floor dorm room. It was quiet, like it was on most weekday afternoons. Nights and weekends had a tendency to get rowdy.

He took off his jacket and plunged into his physics homework. When it came to school, Manny maintained a calm demeanor. He did as well as he possibly could, even if that meant he couldn't crack an A in every subject. He majored in Mechanical Engineering, one of the most difficult programs the university offered. He could have chosen a weak major like psychology, but he always tried to push himself to his limits. So far, his hard work had paid off with a 3.52 GPA after his first two semesters, qualifying him for the dean's list.

Two hours later, he had only finished only five of his nine problems. Time was racing by him. He reached into his mini refrigerator and pulled out a bottle of water, trying to cut back on caffeine. During his freshman year, he drank coffee and soda constantly, which made him jittery.

His roommate, David Coachman, walked into the room. David was from North Jersey. Despite the lineage his family had at Princeton, he chose Stanford. Manny figured that had more to do with getting away from home than to spurn his family. The dude had hardly any friends in high school. He attended his senior prom with the daughter of one of his father's colleagues. He told Manny that if he could go to a place where nobody knew him, that would fix all of his problems. Unfortunately, David didn't seem to be faring much better on the west coast than he did on the east coast.

"Hey, Manny, cranking out those physics problems?" David sat on his bed, which was across from Manny's. He threw his backpack on top of the clutter.

"You know me," Manny said.

“You work too hard. You could easily cut back and still manage a 3.0.”

Manny shook his head. “That’s easy for you to say. You’re so smart, you don’t have to study hard and still get kick ass grades. I’m not nearly as smart as you. Let me take a wild guess. You’re going to start working on your physics problems Sunday at about ten at night.”

“Maybe nine. You should try it some time. You working tonight at the caf?”

“I’m off. I got the Sunday morning shift.”

“That sucks. Guess no wild night out for you on Saturday.”

“Guess not. How ‘bout you?”

“Me? A wild Saturday night? Get real. Not until they start letting geeks into frat parties.” David took off his sneakers.

“You need to work on your self-esteem,” Manny said.

“That’s easy for you to say.” David smiled. “You ooze charm and charisma. You can talk to the jocks and the popular crowd, and even geeks like me. You had like a dozen friends after two days on campus. You’re like a beacon or something; everyone flocks around you.”

“You’re too hard on yourself, David. It’s just that you’re a little, how can I put it, socially awkward. It’s like when you come out with me, you talk about the same lame shit and then when someone tries to change the topic, you still ramble on about it. When the ladies are around, man, you’re a total mess. You fumble your words. I can’t even understand what you’re saying half the time.”

“I know. I’ve always been like this. I’m getting some Pepsi. Need anything?”

“I’m good.” Manny held up his bottle of water.

After David left their dorm room, Manny called home. His mom should have gotten home from her shift. She preferred him to call home since she didn’t want to disturb him when he was studying.

She answered on the second ring.

“Hey, Mom.”

“How are you, Manuel?” she asked.

“I’m good. How about you?” As was typical of their phone conversations, she spoke in Spanish and he responded in English.

“I’ve had better days. I’ve also had worse. Did you hear they arrested that rapist today?”

“The Hail Mary rapist?” he replied.

“Yes. Last night.”

“Get out,” Manny said. “Sometimes I think that the sun could fall into the ocean and I wouldn’t find out about it for a week.”

“It can’t be school all the time,” his mom said.

“Yeah I know. Is Alex home?”

“He’s out with Jorge,” she said, with some distress in her voice.

“What’s going on?”

“Oh, nothing.”

“Come on, Mom, I can tell when something’s bothering you.” He waited for her to respond, but she said nothing. “Listen, by you not saying anything, it’s worse than just going ahead and telling me what’s wrong. Come on, fess up.”

“It’s just that he’s been fighting lately and he keeps getting into trouble. It’s been getting worse...”

“Since I left home,” Manny finished her thoughts. Palo Alto was not far from where they lived in San Francisco, and he could have commuted, but since his scholarship included room and board, he wanted to be away from the distractions of home. His one regret was spending less time with Alex. His mom had her hands full working two jobs and it would be easier for her if he was still around.

“It’s not like that. Alejandro is fine. I just need to keep a closer eye on him. I never had to worry about you getting into fights.”

“It’s not a fair comparison. I’m a different person than Alex. He’s a smart kid. He just needs to be pushed in the right direction. It’s not fair to compare him to me. He’ll never be me. He just has to be the best Alex.”

“I know. I just would like him to listen more.”

“He’s at that stage where what his friends think of him is more

important that what his mom thinks of him,” Manny said.

“You never went through that stage.”

“I did. I just hid it well. Look, I’m coming home next week. I’ll talk to him.”

“He always listens to you. Don’t forget to bring your dirty clothes home.”

“You don’t have to wash them, Mom. I can do it myself”

“Don’t tell me what I have to do. You’re bringing them home, and that’s the end of it.”

“All right. I’m going to dinner.”

“What they serve you over there is not as good as my cooking.”

“You got that right. Take care, Mom.”

“I love you. Call me before you leave next weekend.”

“I will.”

Manny hung up. He was bothered by what she said about Alex. Before their father died, his dad taught Manny discipline, respect, and how to treat others. Alex never got to know their dad. When Manny was home, Alex listened to him, but when he was away, his brother tended to stray. As hard as his mother tried, he needed a male role model. It pained him not to be home sometimes.

David returned to the room.

“Ready to get some food?” Manny asked.

“Is that what they’re claiming it is now?”

“I know what ya mean,” Manny said. “I’m never going to get used to eating in the caf. And I work there, so I know how nasty that shit really is.”

“Please don’t tell me. If I know what goes into that stuff, I don’t think I’ll ever eat it. Then I’ll shrivel up like a skeleton. I’ve been losing weight as it is.”

Manny closed his Physics textbook and shook his head. “Ohm’s law is giving me fits.”

“V equals IR,” David said. “What’s the big deal?”

“I know what Ohm’s Law is, wiseass. It’s just all of these equations start to jumble together.”

“Didn’t you get an A in the first Physics exam?” David asked.

“Yeah. Physics actually isn’t my problem. I’m really struggling with Multi-Variate Calculus.”

“Why? You did well in the first two semesters of Calculus.”

Manny shrugged. “Multi-Variate is a whole different ball game. I had Calculus when I was in high school, so the first semester was no big deal. Second semester was more of the same. With multiple variables, I get bug-eyed. This is the first time in my life that I’m actually struggling with a class. I’ve never gotten less than a B in my life. Not high school. Not elementary school. Never. So, it’s hard for me to deal.”

“That’s a bitch,” David said. “I could probably help you out.”

“I’ll cut you a deal. You help me with Multi-Variate, and I’ll hook you up.”

David’s eyes went wide. “What do you mean?”

“If you help me ace this class, then I’ll set you up with a Mexican girl from my old neighborhood.”

“A Mexican girl?”

“You mean you never dated one? Oh man, you have no idea what you’re missing. There ain’t nothin like them. They make you feel good all over.”

“Yeah?”

“Forget about these lily white girls here on campus,” Manny said

“What are you talking about? You’ve probably dated a half dozen since you started here.”

“Yeah I know, but that’s because that’s all they have around here. I can’t deprive myself.” In truth, Manny had no racial bias or preference when it came to who he dated. He was just trying to get David hooked on the idea of dating a girl from his old neighborhood.

Manny smiled. “Trust me. You date a Mexican girl and you won’t be going back.”

David swallowed hard. “All right. You got a deal. We’ve got some serious work to do. You’re going to get an A in this class if it kills you. Let’s get started.”

“Why don’t we get something to eat first?”

“Oh yeah, yeah.”

As they left the room, Manny felt a little guilty that he was playing his roommate, but he figured this would help them both. Manny needed to ace this class, and David needed social interaction. He just wondered which of his friends would be willing to go out with David. Manny sighed. He would figure something out.

Chapter VIII

When Kevin returned to the station, he had a mountain of paper work and eighteen voice mail messages waiting for him. He had become an instant celebrity, receiving phone calls from the mayor's office, newspapers, magazines, blogs, and television stations, both local and national. It took twenty minutes to get through his messages. During that time he received two additional phone calls. He felt like he was drowning from all the attention.

While tackling his paperwork, he couldn't get Paul's attack out of his mind. Nothing fit. Paul's suggestion that it was a werewolf was preposterous. His friend had been so adamant about it, but Kevin was nowhere near ready to start believing in that insanity.

He began writing the report on the arrest and questioning of Ray Holman. He wanted to talk to Holman again. The prisoner's shell was ready to crack. He was ready to tell his story, and if Kevin played it right, he might be able to coax it out of him. Tomorrow would bring another visit to the city's most famous prisoner.

Captain Lawyer Bishop entered his office. Kevin rose from his chair and walked around his desk. Bishop pulled him in and gave him a quick half-hug. "You have no idea how much I owe you for nailing that son of a bitch. I was getting so much heat from the commissioner and the mayor. I knew if anyone could get the job done, it was you, but I thought they were going to hang all of our asses out to dry before you got your chance. I think I was close to getting fired, but I begged to give you more time, and you came through. You saved my career. If you were a woman I would kiss you."

"Even if I were a woman, you'd still be too ugly to kiss." Kevin grinned.

"Did you see me on TV today?"

Kevin shook his head.

“This here is a million dollar face, made for the cameras.”

Bishop turned to reveal his profile.

“I think that face was made for breaking cameras.”

“In all seriousness, how have you been holding up?”

Kevin grunted and sat down. “I’ve been better.”

“I heard about your friend.” Bishop’s tone grew more serious. “How’s he doing?”

“He’ll live. Last night when I first got on the scene, I thought he wouldn’t make it. He has a concussion, a separated shoulder, and a ruptured spleen, but, like I said, he’ll live.”

“Glad to hear it. I know how tough that must be for you. You’ve had a crazy twenty four hours. So what do you think happened to him?”

Kevin shook his head. “Don’t know, but I intend on finding out.”

Bishop placed a gentle hand on his shoulder. “I know it bothers you that your friend was hurt, but you have too much on your plate right now. Holman is going to keep you busy for a while. If you think something of a criminal nature transpired or something that may be a threat, then I’ll have someone look into it.”

“I can handle it.”

Bishop raised his hands. “Fine, but I’m keeping a close eye on you. Your primary responsibility is to help the DA build a strong case against Holman.”

Kevin handed over the list of names and phone numbers he had written down from his phone and email messages.

“What’s this?” Bishop asked.

“These are all of the people that I don’t want to talk to.”

“That’s a pretty big list.”

“I don’t want to talk to very many people right now. I’ve had a ton of requests for media interviews, and I’m not doing any.”

“You know it wouldn’t hurt to do an interview or two,” Bishop said. “There’s nothing wrong with the public learning more about you. You’re a legitimate hero.”

“I don’t want any part of it. I don’t like the attention. Plus, I’ll never be able to go undercover being so recognizable.”

“I think your undercover days have come and gone. Your pretty face is all over the television and internet. I don’t get it. You get along with everyone at the precinct, so why are you so antisocial?”

Kevin shrugged. “When I leave, people are going to be staring at me, wanting to talk to me. I get edgy around strangers.”

“Loosen up. I’ll take care of this list.” Bishop started walking towards the door. “Thanks again. I owe you big time.”

Kevin returned to his report. He always tried to be meticulous with details. Some of his colleagues’ reports astonished him because they were so poorly written and left out important items.

With no interruptions from a ringing phone and with the office door closed, Kevin continued until he had a respectable report. He leafed through it, with a wide smile on his face. He just nailed the most notorious and infamous serial killer in the state of California since Charles Manson.

If he had enough time, he would go to the hospital to see Paul. With any luck, he might even see Dr. Wendy. Just like Paul, she was never too far from his thoughts.

Kevin dialed the number for William Francis of the Northern California Wildlife Conservatory. The man was an expert on the area’s wildlife.

Francis’s secretary answered the phone. Kevin was in luck because he just arrived. He thought carefully about how he was going to phrase his questions, so that Francis didn’t think he was a loon.

“William Francis speaking.”

“Hi, Mr. Francis, this is Detective Kevin Russell of the SFPD. I spoke to you last year regarding the bobcat sightings in the Presidio.”

“Oh yes. I remember that well. How can I help you?”

“I have some questions about a possible animal attack.”

“In the city?”

Kevin replied, “Yes. What type of animal in this area might attack a person?”

“Hmm. Well there is the coyote and the bobcat. They can be quite dangerous in certain situations. Mountain lions or pumas, as they are commonly known, have been known to attack people.”

Kevin jotted notes. “Are any of those animals large?”

“Not particularly. I suppose mountain lions can grow to be six feet in length.”

“How tall would they be?”

“Only a few feet.”

“What’s the likelihood that a mountain lion could be found on the outskirts of San Francisco?”

“Slim. Highly unlikely. I would not say impossible, but remote.”

“Are there any tall animals, like seven feet in height that could attack a human?”

“What manner of an attack are we talking about?”

Kevin paused and thought carefully. “What about a large animal that stands upright?”

“The only animal in Northern California that could fit that description would be a black bear. But black bears, although carnivorous, primarily have a diet that consists of nuts, berries, and roots. It is unlikely that they would attack a human unless their territory was threatened. In that case they could be quite fearsome. There have been documented accounts of black bears attacking people in parks and forests. Can I ask what has led you to this line of questioning?”

“A friend of mine was attacked last night.” Kevin paused. It was time to dive into Paul’s claims. “How about wolves? Is there any chance of finding a wolf in this area?”

“No. There are no wolves in that habitat this area. What would make you think you have a wolf on your hands?”

Kevin replied, “I’m just trying to cover my bases. Thanks for your time.”

“Oh, it’s not a problem. If there’s any way I can assist you, please don’t hesitate to call.”

Kevin kept the phone off the hook and immersed himself in his work until he heard a knock on his door. He contemplated ignoring it but didn't want to be rude. Much to his delight, it was Rita.

"You look about as tired as I feel," Rita said.

"Thanks. I had a rough night."

"I heard." Rita reached over his desk and held Kevin's hand. "If there's anything I can do to help, just let me know. How's Paul managing?"

Kevin told her what he knew about his friend's medical status. "You know, when I arrived last night, it was like walking into a nightmare. It was surreal. If I tell you something, can you keep it just between the two of us?"

Rita nodded.

"When I got there, I heard movement. Thinking it was whatever attacked Paul, I chased after it. You know how fast I can run fast, but let me tell you, I couldn't come close to matching its speed. Based on the indentation in the tall grass, this thing is huge. And it's still out there."

"What do you think it might have been?" Rita asked.

"Not a clue. I talked to my wildlife guy, and he couldn't give me any insight."

"Let me see if I can find any similar incidents in the past few years." Rita brushed back his hair with her hand.

"Thanks," he said.

"How are you holding up?"

"I'm fine. I'm really sorry. You never gave me the blow by blow detail of what happened last night before you called. How did you know Ray was in your apartment building? Did you get a clean shot at him?"

"Well, I was on edge the whole time. Jim was up at his parents with the boys. I thought it would be a good idea for them to be away seeing as how I was acting as bait for this sicko freak. I turned on the TV then heard movement on the steps. Normally I wouldn't have thought anything of it, but I was wound up over the encounter with

Holman at the church, so I muted the television and went to the door. I could still hear the noise so I got my Glock from the kitchen table. I could hear footsteps leading up to my door. I picked up my cell and called you. For a while I didn't hear anything else, so I waited. Minutes passed by and still nothing. I thought about calling you and telling you not to bother, that it was just me being jittery. Then I heard more footsteps approaching to my door. I opened the door and saw him. He bolted down the steps. I drew the Glock and tried to shoot him, but missed. By the time I got to the entrance I saw you chase him. Well, you know the rest."

"You did a great job. I couldn't have done it without you. Thanks for everything."

Rita shrugged. "Hey, we were on television today. Did you see it?"

"No and no thanks. I got a billion calls, emails, and texts from people wanting to do stories and interviews."

"You're a regular celebrity. How does that make you feel?"

"Like I want to go to a desolate island for the next few weeks."

"Oh come on. You got the looks and the charm. You could be a big, big star. I see Hollywood in your future."

Kevin gave her a look of disapproval, and she stuck her tongue out at him.

"Don't you have to be going?"

"Actually I do." Rita got up from her chair and smiled.

"Hey, thanks for everything. I mean that. You're the best."

"It's been fun working with you. We need to do this again."

If he ever had to take on a partner, he would choose Rita. He was the only detective in Homicide who didn't work with a partner. Thankfully, Captain Bishop allowed him this privilege, one that Kevin got away with because he was good at what he did. Bishop once told him he was the best natural detective he had ever met.

Kevin finished his paperwork and left his office. On his way out, a vice detective told him that a bunch of people in the precinct

wanted to take him out for drinks tomorrow. Kevin agreed to go. He could ignore the press, but not his friends.

For the fourth time that day, Kevin walked through the entrance of the St. Francis Medical Center and proceeded straight to Paul's room.

As he walked down the hall, his heart almost stopped beating when he saw a vision of loveliness. She had long, wavy auburn hair flowing above her white lab coat. He pictured how dazzling she would look in normal clothing. She was on her way out. He had to stop her while he had a chance. "Dr. Davis."

She turned, and a bright smile lit up her face. Her ruby, red lips were soft and inviting. For a moment he was clouded with doubt, figuring she was out of his league.

"Oh, hi, Kevin. Please call me Wendy." She approached from the far end of the hospital reception area. "I just went to see your friend. He's doing fine. Right now, he's sleeping. The nurses will take good care of him, so you don't have anything to worry about. He just needs to rest."

"That's great." Kevin brought along a copy of Mario Puzo's, *The Omerta*, to keep him company if Paul nodded off.

"You're a good friend to visit him so often." Wendy gave him a seductive smile.

That was the opening he needed. "After I left here I was a little distraught that I had met an incredibly attractive and intelligent woman and walked away without so much as inquiring if you were interested in a date. I told myself that if I came back and you were still around that I wouldn't make that same mistake twice. This is my opportunity for redemption. A bunch of people from my precinct want to take me out for drinks tomorrow night at a place near the Wharf. If you're free and available, I would like to take you out to

dinner and then swing over for some drinks. It would greatly enhance my standing in the precinct if you went with me.”

“So, I’m a trophy now?”

Flustered, Kevin didn’t know what to say.

“Just kidding.” Wendy smiled. “I’d love to.”

“You know, I was having a tough day, but now things are looking much, much better.”

“Give me a call tomorrow and I’ll give you directions to my apartment. Do you still have my business card?”

He pulled out her card. “Here it is.” It was slightly crumbled but still legible. “Pick you up at six?”

“Sure. See you then. I’m going home now to sleep myself into a coma. I’ve been here since yesterday morning.”

“You must be about as well rested as I am. Get some sleep.”

They said goodbye. He couldn’t stop smiling as he walked to Paul’s room.

Inside, Paul slept peacefully. He sat next to Paul’s bed and opened his book. His mind wandered and he couldn’t concentrate on his reading.

He noticed movement in the bed, put his book down, and stood.

Paul opened his eyes and blinked rapidly. “Hey, what time is it?”

Kevin glanced at his watch. “Almost five thirty.”

“Damn. I’ve been out for a while.”

“How are you doing?” Kevin asked.

Paul’s face was a little red, but he looked more full of life. “I’m constantly tired. I conked out watching TV. I can’t stay awake for shit.”

“It’s probably the Demerol,” Kevin said.

“Maybe. This stuff is great. I’m all loopy right now. I just keep on pressing this pump here and get a shot. I need this for home usage.”

“Feeling any pain?”

“Just when I move my shoulder I get a sharp pain. My face feels numb. I can’t believe it’s so late. My sister and her husband stopped by earlier.”

Paul did not say anything for nearly a minute. It appeared as if he were about to doze off again, when his face suddenly brightened. “You son of a bitch. I’ve been watching the news all day when I haven’t been sleeping and what do I see? The Hail Mary Rapist was arrested by Detective Kevin Russell. I can’t believe you didn’t tell me.”

Kevin shrugged. “You have other things to worry about.”

“That’s fucking awesome. You never even let me know you were working on this case. How long have you been on it?”

“A few weeks.”

“A few weeks, and you didn’t say anything. What’s up with that?”

“I couldn’t. Everything about the case was strictly confidential.”

With his good arm, Paul waved, “Come on. Rules like that are meant to be broken. When did you arrest him?”

“Last night.”

“Last night! You mean right before I called you?”

“Yeah. A few hours before that.”

“This is huge. They’re going to make you a lieutenant and then a captain. Then you’re going to be damn police chief for a big city, and I’ll be riding your coat tails.”

“You’re jumping ahead of yourself.”

“When I get out, we’re going to celebrate.”

“When are they releasing you?”

“Well I was talking to that Dr. Davis—man, she’s hot—and she told me that I might have to stay through the weekend. I need out by Sunday. The Niners are playing.”

“What time’s the game?” Kevin asked.

“One o’ clock. Big divisional match up with the Seahawks. I want to be home to watch.”

“I’ll tell you what, if you’re still here Sunday, I’ll come over and we can watch together. Maybe I’ll even sneak in some beer”

“You don’t have to do that.”

“It’s no big deal.”

“Well, if you don’t mind.”

They chatted some more. When Kevin saw that Paul was getting groggy, he told Paul to get some rest and that he would return tomorrow. With fatigue starting to settle in, Kevin decided a quick stop to the gym would be the perfect recipe to reenergize himself before returning to the station.

Chapter IX

Kevin started his day off by stopping by the prison to see the infamous Hail Mary rapist. Prior to interviewing Ray Holman in prison, he thoroughly reviewed the murder book. What he saw made him sick. Holman was a cancer on the human race. Now Kevin had to eradicate this tumor by helping the district attorney build a strong case against him.

This time Ray Holman's lawyer, Jason Faulk, was present. Faulk was short and skinny, and had the mannerisms of a rat. He wore wire-rimmed glasses, constantly adjusting them. Kevin had dealt with Jason Faulk before and truly despised the man. Not only did he lack moral fiber, but he truly seemed to have a burning desire to have the scum of the Earth set free. For the first few minutes, Faulk read him the riot act that his client talked to Kevin without him present the day before. He demanded to be present whenever Kevin spoke to Holman.

With Faulk here, Kevin got little useful information from the suspect. The last time they spoke, Holman seemed ready to crack. Faulk continually interrupted the conversation and ran interference. Kevin felt like grabbing the little rat by his neck, shake him, and scream, do you know what your beloved client did? He raped and murdered at least eight women, then took their blood and used it to write a message on the wall. This is the vermin you're trying to defend. Kevin exhibited restraint during the meeting that even surprised himself.

With his lawyer hanging around, Holman wouldn't break, so rather than engage Holman in meaningless banter, he abruptly left. Prior to leaving, he told Holman to let him know when he was ready for a private conversation. Holman stared long and hard at him and nodded.

Kevin and Wendy arrived at the Sea Bass shortly after six in the evening. His visit to Paul in the hospital that afternoon had been difficult since Paul's parents were there. Paul's mother had been so broken up.

What helped him get through the day was looking forward to his date with Wendy. What little social life he had disappeared at the start of the Hail Mary rapist case. For one night, he just wanted to forget about work.

Wendy wore a red skirt and matching sweater. Kevin had on a pair of gray slacks and a polo shirt. They looked like the all-American couple.

Kevin was hoping to go unrecognized tonight, which could be difficult considering his name and image had been plastered on Fox News, CNN, MSNBC, and all three national news broadcasts.

As they waited for their meal, Wendy told him about growing up in Texas and moving to California to attend medical school. In Texas she had ridden horses and roped cattle. He couldn't picture her doing this, but would love to watch it. Her father was a rancher and the family still owned a small cattle farm in Texas.

Their entrees arrived. He had ordered the pan seared Ahi, while Wendy ordered lobster ravioli. Prior to this, they had shared an order of garlic bread. He was glad to see her dig into her food. He preferred women with an unabashed hearty appetite.

"So what made you decide to go into medicine?" he asked.

She finished chewing and tilted her head. "For my undergrad, I majored in molecular genetics. I wound up working in a small lab at the university. The work wasn't terribly interesting, and the pay was lousy. The worst thing was that I could see no way of accomplishing anything. What we were doing in that lab seemed futile. After about a year, I was frustrated and depressed. Not to mention I was working in a lab full of Hungarians who were rude and unfriendly to the only American who worked there. I wanted to do something where I could make a difference. I couldn't just do a job. I wanted

to do something rewarding, so I applied to a number of medical schools around the country and Cal-Irvine accepted me. I did the whole med school thing, which were four of the toughest years of my life. After that, I started my residency at St. Francis.”

“What’s your specialty?”

“Internal medicine. It provides exposure to a wide variety of medical problems. Also, if I do a fellowship in a more specialized area, this would be a good place to start.”

“Being a resident sounds tough. How are you hanging in there?”

“The worst part is the hours. It’s crazy sometimes. I’m usually on call a couple times a week. Calls during the week are thirty-hour shifts, and weekend calls are twenty-four hours.”

Kevin savored his first real meal in a week. The ahi was delicious, and he rarely spoke this freely and easily to a woman he just met.

“Let me guess something about you,” Wendy said.

“Shoot.”

“You like to keep to yourself. You don’t reveal more than you have to. You’re very guarded. When you become friends with someone, you’re very close to them. Also, you don’t take complements well.”

Kevin grinned. “Okay, Dr. Phil, What makes you say that?”

Wendy folded her hands. “Well, you picked me up almost an hour and a half ago and you have yet to tell me that you were responsible for the arrest of the Hail Mary Rapist.”

Kevin sank into his chair.

“Don’t be surprised, it’s been the top story on every news broadcast today. If this happened to anyone else, they would be talking about it nonstop. They would boast about it. Some even more unscrupulous guys would use this as an opportunity to pump themselves up in order to try to get their date in bed tonight.”

“Who says that I won’t?”

“My intuition tells me you’re not like that at all, Kevin. I think you’re different than any guy I’ve ever met.”

“Is that good or bad?”

“I guess we’ll have to wait and see, won’t we? So as I was saying, despite everything going on in your life you visited Paul four times since he was admitted. Most patients can’t get a spouse to visit them that often. You could be doing talk shows and interviews and all that stuff, but instead you’ve chosen to spend that time with your friend. That shows character.”

“Don’t be nominating me for sainthood just yet.”

“Once again, instead of taking a compliment, you show humility.”

Kevin thought back about his visit earlier in the day to the hospital. Paul’s parents had driven up from Arizona to visit him in the hospital. Although Paul looked considerably better, his mom could not stop crying. Her husband did his best to keep it together. Paul’s mom was one of the sweetest and kindest persons he ever had the pleasure of knowing. He fondly remembered her fixing ham and cheese sandwiches and tall glasses of iced tea for him and Paul after football practice. They treated him as if he were their own son. In the summers growing up, Kevin and Paul were inseparable.

Paul’s mom only stopped sobbing when Kevin gave her a big hug. Seeing Paul’s mom react like this felt like a punch to the gut.

As Kevin and Wendy continued talking, he realized he was smitten with the lady sitting across the table from him. Hopefully, she felt the same toward him. He had never fallen this hard and fast for someone before. Had to be the emotional roller coaster he had been riding over the past thirty six hours. Or maybe it was because she was a complete contrast to the ugliness he found in the heart and soul of Ray Holman.

“So what do you look for in your ideal date?” Wendy asked.

Kevin paused, thinking of a response that would make him seem mature and emotionally balanced. “Well, it’s easy to get overwhelmed by looks. I’ve dated attractive women who had little substance. I want someone with wit and intelligence; otherwise the relationship won’t last past a couple of dates. You mentioned before

you took karate lessons before. Which discipline did you study?”

“I took Tae Kwon Do for four years. I had to give it up when I started medical school. I just didn’t have the time to keep up with it.”

“I have a black belt in Brazilian jiu-jitsu and I’ve studied other martial arts disciplines. Maybe I can help you hone her skills.”

Wendy smiled. “That would be fun, getting rough with you. I’ve always been a bit of a tom boy. I’m a huge football fan. It’s almost mandatory if you’re from Texas.”

Wendy asked him a question but he was so mesmerized with her that he did not hear her. He wound up saying, “Huh?” Real smooth.

“Do you want to head out?”

Kevin smiled. “Sure. Let me take care of the check.” He looked at his watch. Wendy offered to pay for half of the bill, but Kevin would not hear it. He was old fashioned that way.

Afterward, they went to the Slippery Slope, which was filled to capacity, mostly with his colleagues. He was glad to see his old Homicide partner Detective Marvin Greer, who worked in drug enforcement these days. Greer was a nice enough guy, but they didn’t mesh well when they worked together. Greer did everything by the book. Kevin was unconventional. After working with Greer for six months, Kevin had approached Captain Bishop and requested that he work alone. He had gone through three partners in a little over two years. Reluctantly, Bishop agreed to let him work by himself.

Kevin enjoyed being with friends and colleagues, even if he felt uncomfortable with the spotlight. He had a few drinks with them, and they even coaxed him into a speech.

Before leaving, he had a chance to see Rita, who teased Kevin about not being able to hang on to a girlfriend for more than a couple of months, suggesting that Wendy was the perfect woman for him, and that she saw wedding bells in their future, even though this was their first date.

Even though he enjoyed himself, he had a sinking feeling that things were about to take a severe turn for the worse.

Chapter X

Alex Marquez knew today would bring trouble. Tension was high between his circle of friends and their enemies. Their ringleader was a foul-mouthed thug named Terron Thomas. They were too young to be considered a gang, but sure acted like it. Alex and his friends were always fighting them behind the school building, at the Gatti Recreation Center, or a nearby playground. Alex wasn't even sure why they fought. All he knew was that they were the enemy. Whenever they were near each other, fierce stares and harsh words led to fists flying if there was no one to separate them.

Things took a dramatic turn when Alex's friend, Saleen, brought a switchblade to school the other day.

When Alex was alone in the boy's bathroom with his friend Jorge, he said, "I can't believe Saleen brought a knife. This is getting crazy. Nobody's got seriously hurt yet, but that will change quickly."

Jorge sneered at him. "What are you, chicken?"

"I'm not chicken. I just don't want to get expelled from school or get arrested."

All day at school on Monday and Tuesday, he kept looking over his shoulder. His conversations with his friends were short. Who would have his back? If things got dangerous, would he have their backs? He knew he should stay away from his friends, but he couldn't abandon them.

He felt more relaxed on Wednesday. Throughout the morning he joked with his friends, getting in trouble with his teacher.

Recess in the school yard passed without incident. Alex was starting to feel that the situation had blown over. That afternoon he even paid attention in class.

When the final school bell rang, Alex packed his books into his backpack. His mom wouldn't be home for another few hours so he planned on going over Jorge's house so that they could play Grand Theft Auto on his Play Station.

After packing his books, he searched for Jorge but could not find him. He ran into Saleen as he was leaving the building. “You seen Jorge?”

Saleen shook his head.

Alex frowned. They always walked home together.

“Let’s go check out the playground,” Alex said

There were a number of students loitering about, but no sign of Jorge. Despite the cool air, Alex began to sweat. They went by the basketball courts in the back of the school. As they were walking, Saleen took out his switchblade from his backpack and put it in his pocket.

A group of people gathered by the basketball courts.

Alex spotted Terron and his minions. Alex still had the opportunity to walk away. Instead, he and Saleen ran right at the brewing trouble. His friends would never take him back. That was the act of a coward, and he was no coward.

Terron and his gang surrounded Jorge and pushed him around. Jorge took a wild swing at one of them and missed.

Saleen grabbed Terron’s right arm and spun him around. A mean scowl lit up Terron’s face.

“Back the fuck off,” Saleen yelled.

“What are you goin’ to do about it, bitch?” Terron asked.

“Don’t get loud with me,” Saleen shouted. “I’ll punch you in the face.”

“Go ahead and try.” Terron motioned to his six friends. “Looks like you’re outnumbered.”

Saleen pulled out his switchblade. “You better leave now, bitch.” He swung the knife from side to side.

Terron’s face turned pale.

Alex’s heart began beating like a jackhammer. How was he going to get out of this? It seemed like the entire world had stopped. All of the students stopped speaking, all eyes locked on Terron and Saleen.

Saleen smiled as he held the knife in his hand, swinging it back

and forth. Terron's eyes were wide. It looked like he was going to cry.

Farrell's janitor stepped out of the shadows. All eyes turned to the janitor, except for Saleen and Terron, who still had their eyes locked on each other. The janitor moved toward the boys and laughed. "Little boys playing with big toys."

Terron and Saleen both stared at the janitor. He scowled at them, and they jumped back.

"What happen here? We can't get along?" He circled around the two boys. "Little boys make big trouble."

Alex shuddered as he looked at the janitor's pock marked face. He wanted to keep as far away from the man as possible. He was one scary hombre. "So what we do with you, huh? Turn you into the principal. Nah, she don't give a shit. Turn you into the police. They let you go with a warning. What we do here, huh?"

Saleen's grip on the knife loosened. "We don't want no trouble, man." He shrunk backward.

The janitor grinned. "Oh you don't want no trouble. You pull the knife out, you ask for trouble, boy. Now you get trouble." With the quickness of a cobra, he took the knife from Saleen's hand.

Alex stared at the janitor with awe. His hand had moved impossibly fast.

Terron trembled as he stepped backward.

The janitor held out the knife. "So you plannin' to slit this boy's throat? That what you gonna do?"

Saleen appeared to be close to tears. "No, sir."

The janitor brought the knife within centimeters of Saleen's neck. One flick of the wrist and he would be able to prick his skin with it. "How you like me do that to you? You want that?"

Saleen lost control of his bladder.

"How 'bout you?" He swung the blade toward Terron. The knife went dangerously close to Terron's neck.

Terron stood completely still. "Please don't hurt me." His voice was barely above a whisper.

The janitor stepped away from the two boys. “There are worse things than a slit throat. You know what could be worse than that?”

Both boys shook their heads.

“You get your arm ripped from its shoulder. You can get your head twisted off like a bottle cap. You get your flesh bitten right off your body and eatin’ alive. Oh yeah. There are worse things. You boys get out of here. I don’t wanna see this shit again at my school.”

The kids scattered like a blooming dandelion in a hurricane. Saleen left with a wet streak down the side of his baggy pants. Jorge scampered off. Terron and his friends went their separate ways.

Only Alex stayed behind, his mind a jumbled mess. The janitor normally blended into the background, but Alex always sensed there was more to him, something dangerous that lurked beneath the surface.

Walking home, Alex felt relieved there had been no bloodshed today. The janitor prevented a disaster from happening. What would happen tomorrow and the day after? Terron would almost definitely be bringing his own weapon into school. Maybe a knife; maybe a gun. Things were going from bad to worse. He needed help. He needed Manny. His brother would know what to do.

Manny cursed as he rode his bike to Chemistry lab. What hateful professor would schedule a lab on Monday from seven to ten at night? Even at a reasonable time, the class was a bear. His experiments never worked out the way that they were supposed to, and the foreign teaching assistants were impossible to understand.

Manny prayed he would be able to finish up early tonight. That meant paying close attention to the TA’s instructions and organizing his experiment carefully.

He parked his bike on a rack, and walked up the stairs. He took absolutely no joy in Chemistry. In comparison, Physics was a leisurely stroll in the park.

He greeted his lab partner, Pinkesh Patel. Pinkesh was here on a

student visa from India. Pinkesh was a nice guy, but didn't have any better idea of how to run the experiments than Manny. At times he wished he had a super smart lab partner who could lead him through the class.

Manny and Pinkesh put their gear on the floor by the lab table, which had to be kept clear to avoid chemical spills. Along with the other student's, they gathered around the TA for pre-lab instructions. The dude was from China. His English was deplorable and his breath was even worse. The subject material was difficult enough, without having to deal with this language barrier. Manny's mom was born in Mexico, but she had learned how to speak the language.

Manny kept at a distance to avoid the dude's dragon breath, but stayed close enough to hear what he was saying. Not that it helped. After listening to the instructions, Manny was as confused as ever.

He and Pinkesh divided the task of gathering the chemicals they needed. As Manny returned from collecting the two-liter container of fully concentrated Hydrochloric Acid, Brad walked into him. The acid splashed around the beaker and almost landed on him.

"Hey, watch out," Manny yelled.

It was Brad. Brad did not even bother responding. To people like Brad, Manny was invisible. The kid was loaded with money and connections but no brains. His father was a top scientist at a large multi-national pharmaceutical company, but apparently didn't bother passing his intelligence on to Brad. Brad was barely hanging on with a grade point average below the probationary level. If not for Brad's family ties at Stanford, he would have been given the boot by now. Rumor had it that at the end of every semester, Brad could be found in the offices of his professors trying to beg, borrow, and plead his way into a passing grade for the course.

Manny glared at Brad as he took his beaker to his lab table. As he went to the equipment cabinet to get a Bunsen burner, Pinkesh retrieved a large beaker with Ammonia. Within a few minutes, Manny was mixing the chemicals together into a wide mouthed flask, while Pinkesh was heating up a compound on the Bunsen burner.

A half-hour later, they were totally lost. They asked the other group at their table for help, but they were equally lost. Manny fetched the Chinese teaching assistant, who tried to explain to them what to do in his broken English. Still confused, Manny bent over to reach for a piece of filter paper to weigh a powder when he got a blast of ammonia. He staggered backward and banged into the table behind him. The room was blurry. He held onto the table to keep his balance and closed his eyes briefly.

Pinkesh grabbed him by his shoulder. "You alright man?"

"I'll be ok." Manny took a deep breath.

"What happened to you, man?" Pinkesh asked.

"I got a face full of ammonia. Nasty stuff."

"Shit, man. The other group at our table took the lid off the beaker and forgot to put it back."

The teaching assistant took Manny by the arm and led him out of the lab room. "Get air. You fine."

Manny took a few deep breaths, glad to be outside. He returned a few minutes later, feeling more human.

"It's good to have you back, man. I'd hate to have to do this on my own," Pinkesh said.

Manny put his safety glasses on and went to work. The ammonia seemed to clear his brain, not to mention his nasal passages. He worked like a man possessed. Within an hour, they finished the experiment.

Pinkesh and Manny packed their stuff and exited the lab, the first team to finish.

On their way out, Pinkesh said, "You need to inhale ammonia more often."

Manny punched his shoulder. "I don't think so. That took about a week off my life."

Manny rode his bike back to his dorm, feeling that maybe he could do this engineering thing after all.

Chapter XI

For the next two days, Kevin waited for Ray Holman to contact him. Talking to Ray with his attorney present was a waste of his time.

Early on Monday morning he met with assistant district attorney Derek Johnson. Derek was a young hotshot, attorney. Unlike Kevin, Derek was a media hound. He had five television interviews lined up for that day. With Derek at the helm, this trial would turn into a circus.

Kevin cut the small talk. “We need to talk to potential witnesses. The way I see it, we have two separate categories of witnesses. You have the people who worked at Ray’s hospital including co-workers, administrators, and people in charge of medical supplies. First we need to verify he had access to the transfusion supplies that he used on his victims. Second, we need testimony that Holman had the expertise to commit these crimes. The next group of people is Ray’s family members, friends, and acquaintances.”

“I’ll cover the hospital,” Derrick said. “You handle the family and friends. When will we get the DNA results?”

“In the next day or two,” Kevin replied. “Once we get the DNA match of the victims, Holman will be sunk. What more do you have on Holman?”

“His parents died in a house fire when he was young. From what I gather he has little interaction with the rest of his family. He doesn’t have many friends. He’s a bit of a loner.”

“Hopefully, his relatives and acquaintances can provide the link to establish that he was indeed capable of killing,” Kevin said. “Holman’s intelligent, but deeply disturbed. He’s fixated on committing wrong deeds and the punishment associated with it, yet he doesn’t consider what he did to be wrong. If I can probe deeper, I’ll find his motive.”

Kevin took out the murder book, which included interviews with family and friends of the victims, as well as details establishing a

religious connection in these killings. “I want you to review these files.”

Derek nodded. “I’ll do it this morning. Let’s meet every morning until we lay the ground work to guarantee a conviction.”

Kevin smiled. Derek might be a media hound, but he would work tirelessly to nail this bastard.

Before Kevin left, Derek asked, “Am I going to see you at the preliminary hearing?”

He had been contemplating this since yesterday. “I don’t think so. It’s going to be a media feeding frenzy. The preliminary hearing’s just a formality, anyway.”

Kevin left the office and skillfully navigated his Pathfinder through the streets of San Francisco, cruising around the city’s hills and winding turns.

Kevin was attached to his cell phone for most of the day. He had a hard time locating Holman’s family. After several failed attempts, he contacted Holman’s aunt, Mallory Hughes, now in her sixties and living alone near San Jose.

On the phone, she told him she didn’t have much contact with Ray these days, that he was an ungrateful boy after all she did for him. Reluctantly, she agreed to meet Kevin the next day.

The rest of the afternoon was a lesson in futility. Holman had few people he was close to. His cousin Matthew had not spoken with Ray in nearly a decade. Kevin spoke to a couple of old high school friends who had similarly fallen out of touch. Another aunt and uncle refused to speak with Kevin and hung up the phone. His only solid lead was Holman’s aunt Mallory. Being his legal guardian after his parents died when he was fourteen, she had to have some insight into him as a person.

Late in the afternoon, Kevin received a call from Paul. His doctor had given him a clean bill of health and discharged him from the hospital.

“You need a ride home?” Kevin asked.

“No, I’m good. My folks can take me home.”

“Okay,” Kevin said. “I’ll stop by later to see how you’re coping.”

Impulsively, he paged Wendy. He knew she was busy at the hospital, but he just wanted to hear her voice.

She called him back a minute later, sounding out of breath.

“I just spoke to Paul,” Kevin said. “He said he’s being discharged.”

“I saw him earlier today,” Wendy said. “He looks much better.”

“I just wanted to thank you for all you’ve done.” Kevin paused. “I’d like to see you again.” He had been careful about approaching a sequel date. They both had tough schedules, and he did not want to push her. “I know you’re busy, but I can’t get you out of my mind.”

“Me too.”

“When can I see you again?” Kevin asked.

“Tuesday. I’m post-call, so I can leave the hospital early. If I have a rough night, I’ll sleep for a few hours before you come over.”

“It doesn’t have to be anything big,” Kevin said.

“I’ll cook you dinner. I make a mean chili. It’s my specialty.”

“See you then.”

Kevin hung up the phone and lingered at his desk, thinking about Wendy before leaving to see Captain Bishop. Bishop wanted continual updates on the Ray Holman case.

The door to Bishop’s office was partially opened. Bishop’s large figure sat in his chair with his back to Kevin while he was speaking on the phone. Kevin waited outside of his office and glanced at his watch. A minute later, Bishop put the phone in the cradle.

“Take a seat. How have you been?”

“Much better now that all of the craziness is over. What’s going on? You sounded pretty animated on the phone.”

Bishop waved his hand. “A woman was apparently killed by an animal in Russian Hill. If you ask me, this is more of a situation for animal control. I sent someone to investigate.”

Kevin sat straight. His first thought was Paul. “How big was the animal?”

Bishop shrugged, “I don’t know. Big.”

“Put me on the case.”

“I don’t think I heard you correctly.”

“Please put me on the case.”

Bishop gave a look he might give to a disobedient dog. “Those were the words I thought came out of your mouth, but I must be hearing things. Your plate’s a little full right now.”

“Captain, put me on this case.”

“No chance. You need time off, not another case.”

“Trust me on this,” Kevin said.

“I need to save you from yourself.”

Kevin wasn’t going to leave this office before Bishop assigned him this case. “I would hope that by this point I’ve earned your trust.”

“Of course I trust you, but you have enough on your plate working on the Holman trial. You’re pushing yourself too hard. Give me one compelling reason that I should listen to you.”

“Because I have an insight into the case that no one else could possibly have.”

Bishop’s brow rose. “And what might that be?”

“I’ll let you know when it materializes.”

Bishop sighed. “I love you like a son, but you’re a royal pain in my ass. You’re not going to leave here until I give you the case, are you?”

Kevin smiled. “You know me too well.”

“All right. It’s yours, but I’m keeping you on a tight leash. If your work on Holman starts to slack, I’m pulling you.”

“Thanks.”

Kevin took a deep breath as he left Bishop’s office. Whatever killed this woman also attacked Paul. He could feel it. He was going to find this culprit no matter what it took.

Chapter XII

Kevin drove to Sacramento to meet Mallory Hughes. She told him ahead of time that she did not have much time to meet. She worked as a secretary for a small computer graphics firm and claimed they couldn't possibly operate without her.

Once inside her office building, he encountered numerous people scurrying around. When he saw Mallory Hughes, she was simultaneously talking on the telephone, typing something, and having a conversation with a man dressed in a black suit. He tried to fade into the background. After a couple of minutes she was no longer on the phone, and the man she had been speaking with retreated to his office. He stepped forward. Not looking up from her computer, Mallory asked, "Can I help you, sir?"

"I certainly hope so," Kevin replied. "I'm Detective Kevin Russell."

Mallory Hughes looked up at him. "Detective Russell, it's a pleasure to meet you." He was surprised by her warm reception. She had been more guarded yesterday on the phone. "I've read all about you." She held up the front cover of a newspaper that had his picture on it followed by a feature on him. "You're far more handsome in person."

"Thank you," replied Kevin. "It's lunch time. If you're hungry, I would like to sit and have a bite and talk to you. I saw a deli down the street. My treat."

"How lovely," Mallory said.

They walked out of the office building and down to the Sun Beam Deli, an eclectic restaurant featuring a number of tofu specialties, the kind of place Kevin normally have avoid, but it was near her office, and he didn't have time to waste.

Mallory ordered tuna salad on rye bread while Kevin ordered a New England clam chowder in a sourdough bread bowl.

After a few minutes, Kevin decided that Aunt Mallory had an

engaging personality, but something about her bothered him. Something dark lurked underneath her kind old lady surface.

In an effort to gain her trust, Kevin asked her questions about herself and her occupation before asking about Holman.

“Ray was a wicked boy, always hanging around questionable characters. Never had a girlfriend. It was a chore taking care of him. It doesn’t surprise me that he wound up doing what he did,” Aunt Mallory said.

This was not the response Kevin was expecting. “How was he wicked?”

She finished chewing a bite of her tuna salad sandwich. “Ray did many bad things. That was why my sister had to punish him.”

“What bad things did he do?”

“He did wicked things with himself. He...when he was alone he would fondle himself. And he had the devil’s tongue. My sister Laura just couldn’t believe the words that came out of the boy’s mouth. But the worse was when my Laura caught him trying on her clothing. Oh the boy was a sinner. Evil to the core. She had to punish him.”

“How did she discipline him?” There was more here than what Aunt Mallory was telling him.

“Ray’s parents had their own method of disciplining. You have to understand that they did what they thought was best. It was not the method I chose when he lived with me, but he was a nasty boy. No, I can’t say I disapprove of what they did.” She seemed indecisive about whether or not she should continue.

“We all have our own way of discipline, Mallory. Some need more than others.”

She nodded. “You are absolutely right, Detective Russell. So I suppose when Laura made the boy recite the Hail Mary fifty times, that was the right thing for her to do.”

Kevin frowned. He was prepared for Aunt Mallory to drop a bomb. He hardly considered having to say the Hail Mary prayer a rugged punishment. “Was that all?”

“Well, of course, Laura had him remove his clothes when he said the prayer.” Aunt Mallory looked down at the remains of her tuna salad sandwich. “And she lashed him with a leather belt. He was, after all, a wicked boy.”

As Kevin pulled into the driveway, he reached into his glove compartment and pulled out a small jar of Vicks VapoRub. He dabbed it with his fingers and rubbed it under his nose. Seeing a corpse at a murder site was never easy. The last thing he wanted was to leave the scene in order to vomit.

Kevin struggled through the crowd that had gathered around the old Victorian house. The crowd murmured as he passed them. He heard several of them mention his name. He raised his badge, and the officer guarding the entrance let him pass.

A young cop beamed at him. “Hi, Detective Russell. I heard you would be investigating. It’s an honor to work with you.”

Kevin frowned, still uneasy with his new found fame.

Upon entering the house, Kevin greeted the officers. His thoughts kept drifting to his conversation with Mallory Hughes. It was all falling into place. The way Holman raped and killed these women was some sort of ritualistic remembrance of his childhood.

Focus on the here and now. Right now he had a dead body to attend to. He owed the deceased his full attention. The corpse was still on the floor. The officers on site assured him it had not been moved. He removed the covering from the mangled body. One arm was torn off completely; the other barely hung to the torso. There was a large gaping wound in the woman’s abdomen, from which her intestines had partially spilled out. Taking a deep breath, he leaned over to inspect her face. Her forehead was caved in just above the nose. It was almost like someone had permanently indented the palm of their hand into her head. Dried blood covered part of her scalp, from which her curly black hair had been torn. She was missing a large chunk of flesh from her right upper thigh and quadriceps. Her right breast was completely torn off.

Kevin covered the deceased. It was all that he could bear for now. He would revisit the body later. For now, he wanted to question the officers who discovered the corpse.

He found Officer Berehowsky standing outside of the kitchen with a blank look on his face. After introducing himself, Kevin told the young cop to have a seat on one of the chairs from the kitchen table. Berehowsky was visibly shaken.

“You all right?” Kevin asked.

“I don’t know.” Berehowsky stared at the table. “What the fuck happened here? This woman looked like she stepped on a landmine. I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“That’s what I’m here to find out. Whoever or whatever did this has to be found, and I’m going to need your help.”

Berehowsky said, “I can’t think straight. Maybe I’m not cut out for this shit. Maybe I should be handing out parking tickets or something.”

“I’ve been in homicide for five years and I haven’t seen a corpse as bad as this one. How was the body discovered?”

Berehowsky opened his notebook. “One of the neighbors, Juanita Gage, was watering flowers in her garden when she noticed that the front door was ripped off of its hinges...”

Kevin furrowed his brow. “Ripped off the hinges?”

“Yeah that’s what I thought when I first heard it. She walked over to the house and noticed blood on the walkway. She called out to the deceased, Danielle Bloch. When the deceased did not answer, she went into her house and dialed 911. My partner and I answered the call. We found the deceased on the floor in between her bathroom and bedroom. We secured the property and called for backup.”

“You did a fine job,” Kevin said. “What about next of kin?”

“We contacted her ex-husband already. He lives in Oregon. We couldn’t reach her daughter. She’s a student at Cal-Santa Barbara.”

Kevin inspected the door. As Officer Berehowsky mentioned, it had been ripped off of its hinges and was lying on the floor. The

wood was splintered. What the hell did this? There was no way a person could be strong enough. An animal would also be incapable.

He looked around the house and saw the memories that had been built here. The living room was decorated with photos of the woman's daughter and other family members. Framed pictures of school dances and graduations stood on shelves. Some of these frames had been shattered. The television set was destroyed beyond recognition. The legs on the dining room table had collapsed from under it.

He took a deep breath and uncovered the body. Marks covered the woman's throat as if she had been constricted. He doubted a person had choked her since there were no handprints or scratches from the attacker's fingernails.

He put on latex gloves and examined flecks on the body that he thought might have been skin from her attacker. Using a set of tweezers, he lifted the specimen and held it up to the light. This wasn't skin. They were scales, similar to what could be found on a lizard or snake. He put the dried scales into an evidence bag.

Carefully, he turned the corpse to examine the victim's back. Marks covered her back. He did a double take. They appeared to be bite marks, but not the kind a mammal would make. They looked more like snakebites, which would be consistent with the scales he discovered on her neck and chest. There was no way a snake could have done all of this. It sure as hell couldn't rip a door off its hinges, or tear a woman's leg off and chew off a large chunk of flesh off her thigh and quadriceps.

A long scratch ran down her left buttock to her calf. This was obviously not the work of a snake. Maybe a cat or a wolf. At the part where the scratch marks ended, the ligaments and tendons of her heel were cleaved. Beneath this spot was a pool of blood.

He gently turned over the body, examining the area of her thigh that had been bitten. These marks came from large teeth, nothing like the snakebites on her back. Maybe from a dog or a mountain lion. He peered down her leg. The flesh was stripped all of the way

to the femur. The femur had been chipped, and some of the marrow appeared to have been sucked out. The same scales he had seen earlier were near the marrow inside of the bone. He placed a sample into an evidence bag.

Kevin slowly rose. His neck was stiff from having been hunched over during the examination. As he cracked his neck, something near the broken television caught his eye.

Wedged between the television and the wall was a dark brown patch of fur. He put the fur into an evidence bag. Nothing matched. It was like a zoo had invaded this house and pulverized Danielle Bloch.

He searched the rest of the house. The bedroom looked untouched. Even the bed was made. He found nothing in the two other bedrooms. The remainder of the house did not appear to be damaged or burglarized. No food appeared to have been taken from the kitchen. An animal would likely search for food, unless the victim was the food.

Outside the house, more people gathered, including a television news van.

He had all he could handle with the press already. Just this morning, a reporter for the San Francisco Chronicle cornered him. He politely told the reporter he had no comment, but the weasel kept following him and asking questions. Kevin reiterated that he did not have time to speak now and almost lost it when the reporter tried to force his way into Kevin's car. He could have broken the twerp into twenty pieces if he wanted to, but fought to control his anger. Kevin had to forcefully remove the reporter from his car.

Before leaving, he took out his phone and looked up the number of William Francis, the director of the Northern California Wildlife Conservatory.

After two rings, Francis' secretary answered. After he introduced himself, she immediately connected him to her boss. He explained the situation to Francis.

Francis's voice sounded frantic. "This is incredible. I have to

see it for myself.”

Kevin snuck out a back door, convinced that nobody saw him leave.

Matt Szatko’s face lit up as he spotted Detective Russell making a hasty retreat out of Danielle Bloch’s house. With his camera in hand, Matt snapped some pictures that were sure to make it onto the front page of his newspaper the following morning. This would teach that bully that he couldn’t strong-arm the press. Matt firmly believed that the people had a right to know everything. He took it as a personal insult when this golden boy of the SFPD declined to be interviewed. He only arrested the most famous serial killer in the state of California since Charles Manson. Damn it, the people needed to know about it. Well, Matt was a man of the people and he would bring them the story.

Matt had just been doing his job, trying to get Russell to answer some questions when the detective assaulted him earlier that morning. It would serve him right if Matt filed a complaint and took legal action, but he could do far worse damage with his pen. That was what led him to follow Russell to the police station and tail him all afternoon. It had been a brilliant plan, and now he was rewarded with this juicy story.

Chapter XIII

Alex was in a daze as he left the school yard. People were going to get hurt. He was sure of it. His chest felt heavy with pressure.

He couldn't go home quite yet, so he walked past the Starbucks and the In and Out Burger. Up in the distance, he saw a familiar bus stop, the one Manny used to go to Stanford. Checking the change in his pocket, he had just enough money for a one way bus fare.

After waiting five minutes, he stepped into the bus and walked to the back. Staying clear of the homeless guy at the rear, he took his seat.

Alex yawned and closed his eyes. Jolting awake when the bus hit a bump, he looked around in a daze. Had he missed his stop? He had only been to Stanford once and wasn't that familiar with the campus. His heart raced. He looked out the window and had no idea of where he was.

He got up from his seat. The bus was only half-full. The homeless guy was still stinking up the back of the bus. A couple of old dudes sat across from him.

A little further up was a young, white girl reading a book. She had light brown hair that barely reached her shoulders. Her face was lightly freckled and free from blemishes. She wore thin glasses that made her look smart. She probably went to Stanford. He walked toward her and tugged on her shoulder. "Excuse me." Alex shook as he stood before her.

She smiled and closed her book. "Hey, buddy, what's going on?"

Alex was on the verge of tears. "I'm trying to get to Stanford and I don't know if I missed my stop. I don't know where I'm at and if I missed my stop I could get into a lot of trouble."

She put her arm around his shoulder. "Don't worry. We still haven't reached campus. That's where I am heading. I can help you. Where do you need to go? Is there anyone you're looking for?"

The color returned to Alex's face. "Yeah, I'm lookin' for my

brother, Manny. I forget what dorm he lives in.”

“That’s okay. I’m sure we can figure it out. I’m Mary by the way. What’s your name?”

“Alex.”

“It’s nice meeting you Alex. So what’s your last name?”

“Marquez.”

Mary laughed. “Is your brother Manny?”

Alex nodded.

“I know Manny. He’s in my English Lit class. You know, you’re just as cute as your brother.”

Alex blushed. Mary was like an angel that had descended from heaven to help his poor soul.

“Sit next to me until we get to our stop.” She slid over and Alex sat beside her. “Tell me what his dorm is like so I can figure out where to take you.”

Alex tried to remember as best he could. He gave her a sketchy description.

“I think I know where your brother lives. If I’m not mistaken, his dorm is next to mine. Do you know what his room number is?”

“I think it’s 528,” Alex said.

“We’ll be reaching our stop in a few minutes.”

Alex relaxed, his ensuing panic gone.

“Well, this is it,” Mary said.

After putting on her backpack, Mary took his hand and led him out of the bus. Alex looked in awe at the campus. It was much nicer than his neighborhood. He hoped that someday he could go to a school like this. His grades weren’t as good as Manny’s, but that was because he didn’t work hard enough.

Mary led him across campus.

“I think this is the one,” Alex said.

She took Alex to the elevator and pressed the button. Alex looked up at her with a mixed expression of awe and admiration. She smiled at him. When they stepped into the elevator, she pushed the button for the fifth floor.

Upon exiting, they walked toward room 528. As they got closer, he wondered if he made a mistake coming over here after school by himself. His mom would probably freak out when she came home and he wasn't there.

Mary knocked on the door. When Manny opened it, his eyes went wide.

Mary brought Alex into view. "I have a present for you."

"Alex! What are you doing here?"

"I found him on the bus on his way over here, so I provided him safe passage."

"Thanks." Manny smiled. "That's very kind of you. I owe you big time."

She let go of Alex's hand. "You got that right. And I fully expect you to pay me back." Mary winked.

"You're the best," Manny said.

"Well I guess I'll be going." Mary bent over and gave Alex a hug. He hugged her back fiercely.

"Do I get one?" Manny asked.

"Of course." Mary hugged him and gave him a peck in the cheek. "See you in class." She smiled and left.

After she was out of view Manny turned toward Alex. "What's going on? How come you came up here after school? You did go to school, right?"

Alex sat on Manny's bed. For a while he trembled and said nothing, searching for the right words.

"Whatever happened, it's all right, man. You're my little brother. I'll take care of you no matter what. You can count on that." He put his hand on Alex's shoulder.

"Bad stuff happened after school. You know my friends, Jorge and Saleen?"

"I know Jorge, not Saleen."

"We've been fighting with this kid Terron. He's a real asshole. So anyway, Saleen brought a knife into school."

"He brought a knife into school?" Manny repeated very slowly.

“That’s some bad news.”

“Yeah, I know. I know. Anyway, that was earlier in the week.”

“Alex, something like that happens, you call me right away. I can get home in no time. If your friend is carrying a knife, that could spell big time trouble for you.”

Alex frowned. “Anyway, today after school, Terron and his boys were going to jump Jorge. We saw what was goin’ down so we go runnin’ after them. Saleen pulls out his knife, and I was really scared.

“So then the janitor comes out from nowhere right when everything is about to go down. He was like a ghost or something. I don’t know. All I know is that he spooked me. He starts talkin’ and sayin’ all kinds of stuff. Then he takes the knife from Saleen.” Alex attempted to duplicate the motion the janitor used. After several attempts he gave up. “It was so fast, man, it was like we couldn’t even see his hand move. The next thing you know, he waves Saleen’s knife at both of them like he was going to cut them. Then the janitor tells everyone to leave.”

“Good thing he was there. Have you spoken to anyone since this happened?”

“No. Except for that girl I met on the bus. Who’s she?”

“Just a girl in one of my classes.”

“She’s pretty. You should go out with her.”

“I have other things on my mind right now, like you little brother.” Manny paced around the room. “Ok. Listen to what I tell you. You’re done with Jorge and Saleen and their crew. You haven’t gotten into trouble yet, but you’re walking a slippery slope.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means that if you continue hanging with them, you’re going to be in deep trouble. Look, this Saleen’s bringing a knife into school. He’s doing you no favors. That’s a recipe to get kicked out of school or get arrested. I don’t want you to ever hang around them again.”

“But they’re my friends.”

“You need to be your own person. You’re better than that. If they’re involved in that sort of stuff, then they’re not your friends. I know these guys seem important to you now, but they’ll wind up on drugs, in jail, or dead. You’re going to go to college and move on, and these guys are going to stay behind. What seems really important now, you’ll realize in the grand scheme of things don’t matter. You’re my only brother, Alex, and I’m not going to let that happen to you. Think what would happen to Mama if you went and got yourself killed or in big time trouble.”

Alex was sobbing now.

“Look, Alex, it’s not too late to stop this. You just gotta stop hanging around those guys. Look at me. I have plenty of friends. I never hung around guys like that. You might think they’re cool, but they’re losers, and some day they’re going to be down and out. That’s no kind of life to lead. You don’t need people like that dragging you down.”

Manny put his arm around Alex. Neither of them spoke. Alex would do whatever his brother told him, even if it meant no longer hanging with his friends.

“Look, Mom’s going to be worried. I need to call her.”

Just then, the telephone rang. Alex cringed.

Manny picked up the phone. “Hey, Mom...It’s okay. Alex is with me here...It’s my fault. There’s an exhibit at the science and engineering library that I wanted Alex to see, so I picked him up after school, and we took the bus here. We just got back.”

Alex lowered his head and stared at the floor, feeling guilty as hell that his brother was lying for him.

“I know. I’m really sorry, but I’ve had so much on my mind lately that I just forgot...I know. I’m sorry. I won’t do it again. Look, I’ll be taking Alex back on the bus soon...Sure. Dinner sounds great. I’m always hungry...See you later.”

Manny hung up the phone and turned to his brother. “Let’s roll.”

“Thanks for telling Ma that it was your fault.”

“Don’t expect me to that again,” Manny said. “You have to start taking responsibility for your actions.”

Alex smiled as they left. He knew that no matter how bad things got, he could always count on his brother to make it better.

Chapter XIV

After having investigated that mutilated body earlier, Kevin was hardly in the mood to go out. He was used to death, but this was no ordinary death. Whatever tore apart this poor woman was still out there, terrorizing the citizens that he swore to protect. For a few hours, he even stopped thinking about Ray Holman.

The death scene couldn't escape his mind. All day he kept seeing the bite marks on Danielle's body, or the scratch's around her neck. Her pale face haunted him when he closed his eyes.

Despite this, he kept his date with Wendy. After all, she had rearranged her schedule so they could be together.

After leaving Danielle Bloch's house, he drove to the station. His first stop was to see Bishop and update him on both of his cases.

When he got back to his office, he took out a pad of paper and wrote down every potential assailant of Danielle Bloch, no matter how ridiculous it seemed. If Bishop saw this list, he would make Kevin see the departmental shrink. It ranged from a person breaking in and unleashing several animals upon the victim, to an animal that may have been the subject of laboratory experiments that went awry, to an undiscovered species, to aliens, to Paul's werewolf. There were two things he eliminated. First, it could not be a normal human being. Second, it could not be any animal Kevin knew about.

He ran his fingers through his hair. What the hell was he doing entertaining these thoughts? There had to be a more logical conclusion. He had to talk to Paul again, this time seriously considering his story instead of dismissing it as a delusion due to his head injury.

As he was doing research on the internet, William Francis arrived. Francis was short, overweight, and balding. He wore a white shirt and tie and looked about as ordinary as a person could look.

He greeted Francis and put away the list he had been working on. They walked to the police station parking lot and got in Kevin's

SUV. Francis immediately began peppering him with questions about the body and crime scene.

“Look, I don’t want you to have any pre-conceived notions of what may or may not have occurred during the attack. I want you to tell me what you think after you look at the body.”

When they arrived at the hospital, Francis became quiet. He gave a nervous laugh. “I haven’t ever actually seen a dead body outside of a funeral.”

Kevin tried to distract Francis by asking him questions about his background. As the wildlife expert started to talk, he looked more at ease. He led Francis into the room that held Danielle Bloch’s corpse.

The pathologist was there to meet them. Francis gasped when the doctor wheeled out the corpse and uncovered it.

“Are you going to be all right?” Kevin asked. “If you want, we can step outside to get some air.”

Francis shook his head. “I’ll manage.” He took a few deep breaths. “Okay. Let’s have a look.” Francis put on a pair of latex gloves. He turned and looked at Kevin. “You’re suggesting these injuries were inflicted by an animal?”

“I’m not suggesting anything,” Kevin replied.

Francis continued to examine the body. Once he got past the torn limbs, he examined the marks around the woman’s neck. He pointed to the woman’s neck and asked the pathologist, “Did you determine that to be the cause of death?”

“No. My preliminary diagnosis indicates that hemorrhage was the cause of death.”

“What do you think strangled this woman?” Kevin asked.

“These marks appear to be the result of a very large snake,” Francis answered. “Perhaps a python or a boa constrictor.”

“Is that type of snake found in this area?”

Francis shook his head. “Only if they came from a nearby zoo.” He pointed to the large bite marks on the woman’s chest and abdomen. “These bites are consistent with a snake of that size. I don’t know what could have caused the severance of the leg and the

torn flesh, but I can assure you that a snake could not inflict this type of damage.”

Kevin asked the pathologist to turn over the body, and Francis closely examined the smaller bites on her back.

“What do you think?” Kevin asked.

Francis shook his head. “These bites could be from a smaller snake, maybe a rattlesnake, perhaps a copperhead or a member of the corral snake family. The other possibility, judging on the separation between bite marks, is that it could have been caused by rats.” He turned toward the pathologist. “I have a venom identification kit. Would it be okay to use this on the subject to see what type of snake bit her?”

The pathologist nodded and Francis went to work.

After he was finished performing the test and, he examined the large scratch mark going down her calf toward her partially severed tendon.

“I thought that that might have come from a wolf,” Kevin said.

“It’s possible,” Francis said. “It actually appears more likely to be done by a big cat, perhaps a leopard or a tiger.”

“Are they found in this area?” Kevin said.

“Of course not.”

The pathologist frowned. “Tiger, wolf, snake, bear—what the hell happened to this woman? Was she let loose in the zoo tour from hell?”

“I wish I knew,” Kevin replied

After Francis completed his examination, he removed his latex gloves. “This defies all of my reasoning and cognitive skills. The damage inflicted on this woman’s body appears to be the work of a number of animals. Some... couldn’t even have been done by an animal.”

“Great,” Kevin muttered. The Hail Mary rapist case was starting to look simple in comparison to this case.

After they left the building, Francis lit it a cigarette. He offered one to Kevin who declined. Francis smoked the cigarette outside of Kevin's car. When he was done they both entered the car.

Kevin went over scenarios in his mind. He turned to Francis. "Best guess, what could have done this?"

Francis shook his head. "I'm truly baffled. I can't even begin to speculate."

"There's more." Kevin drove to the forensics laboratory to view the physical evidence collected at the crime scene. Francis hardly spoke on the ride to the lab.

They arrived at the parking lot of the forensics lab.

"So what surprises do you have in store for me now?" Francis asked, wiping the sweat off his brow.

"See for yourself. I don't want to cloud your judgment."

When they got to the lab, Kevin chatted with the clerk. Susan was a bright eyed, red-head who was always willing to help Kevin out, even if it meant breaking the rules. In fact, she seemed to enjoy the conspiratorial nature of some of Kevin's requests.

Kevin sweet-talked Susan for a couple of minutes before requesting the evidence he submitted earlier that day. She retrieved it for him.

He took the bags into one of the labs for examination. They each put on a pair of latex gloves. First, Kevin handed him the bag with the scales. Francis opened the bag and handled a few scales. "Do you have a microscope nearby?"

Kevin provided him with a microscope.

"Well, it certainly could be scales from a snake. Can't eliminate that. But there is something strange about the scales." Francis scrunched his forehead, prominently featuring his receding hairline. "These don't seem like ordinary scales. Would it be possible if I could take a few of these scales and examine them more closely back at my facility?"

Kevin looked at the remaining contents in the bag. "I think we could spare a couple. I'll fill out the necessary paperwork." Kevin

went to get another bag and a set of forceps. Carefully, he extracted three scales and placed them in the new bag, then sealed the bag. He handed it over to Francis, who put it in a pouch.

“Thank you,” Francis said. “What else do you have for me?”

Kevin produced a bag that contained fur. “I obtained this hair sample near the body of the victim. I thought maybe it belonged to a bear or a wolf.”

William took the hair follicles and shook his head. “No. The hair is too thick for a wolf and too coarse for a bear. I haven’t really seen anything quite like this. You have yourself quite a puzzle here, detective.”

“Tell me something I don't know.” Kevin sealed up the bag and returned it to the clerk.

They returned to Kevin’s office. Repeatedly, Francis wiped his brow with his handkerchief. “There are so many possibilities here. Perhaps a mutant species or maybe a number of animals working together in unison. Hmm, I wonder if someone could have trained all of these animals to attack in concert.”

Kevin pulled up a chair that was covered with a stack of papers. He cleared the stack, and motioned for Francis to sit on it. “You’ve seen all of the physical evidence and the body, but I haven’t given you all of the details. Brace yourself for this one.”

“After what I have seen already today, I’m ready to hear anything.”

“When I arrived at the woman’s house, the police officers at the scene showed me that there was a forced entry. Whoever broke in and killed this woman tore the door off of its hinges and threw it onto the lady’s lawn.”

“Remarkable.” Francis removed his glasses and wiped them with his shirt. “Well, I can tell you that no animal could have done that. I suppose that in theory, a brown bear would have the strength to do it, but it lacks the manual dexterity required to grab a door handle and tear it off in that manner. If a brown bear were to break into a

house, which is completely unheard of, then it would bash the door in.”

“Well, I can tell you that a person could not do that. Nobody has that kind of strength. Someone could tear off a door by attaching it to a strong enough cord to a vehicle, but there’s no evidence to suggest that occurred. So where does that leave us?”

Francis stared at him blankly. “I don’t know. You’re the detective. I’m just an animal expert.”

Kevin’s heart skipped a beat when Wendy opened her door. Wearing a flannel shirt and jeans, she looked like she had recently awoken.

“Wake up, sleepy head,” he said.

She hugged him and gave him a kiss that made him feel warm inside. She showed him around her tiny one-bedroom apartment. “It’s small, but it’s home.”

“I think its cozy,” Kevin said.

Wendy shrugged. “It works for me. How about I start whipping us up dinner? I hope you’re ready for the meanest chili in San Francisco.”

Kevin smiled. “I like my chili mean.”

“Why don’t you entertain yourself?” She threw him the remote control. “I’m sure if you flip around long enough you’ll find a story about your Hail Mary rapist. He’s very popular on the news these days. It’s kind of surreal. I’ve heard your name mentioned on the television about a half-dozen times.”

“How do you think I feel? I prefer not being so recognizable.”

“You’re young, good looking, and famous. What a hardship!”

Kevin set aside the remote control, preferring conversation instead.

Wendy stirred her chili. “I woke up just in time. I’ve been sleeping all afternoon. Of course, I didn’t get any sleep last night. It

was brutal, one call after another. The Emergency Room was flooded. To make things worse, one of my patients died on me.”

“Sorry to hear about that,” Kevin said.

“He was an old man. He suffered a massive heart attack and a code blue was called.”

“What’s that?”

“That’s when you drop what you’re doing and run to where the code is happening. That’s the last thing you want to hear. So anyway, the code took place at two AM. I was attending to another patient, this senile woman with kidney problems. I rush over and I was the first doc at the scene so I had to run the code. We tried to resuscitate him, but nothing worked, and he died shortly after I arrived.”

Kevin sighed. He had experienced enough death lately. “That’s awful.”

“You get used to it. The problem is that you get immune to these patients dying. You just hope and pray that it doesn’t happen when you’re on call. I get so tired some times that my head starts to spin and I get annoyed when I get paged. So many of the patients are old and have little chance of recovery, so there is little you can do to help them. In fact, usually the best treatment is often to do nothing. It’s different when you have a younger patient who is responsive and full of life. It gives you hope that you can help them go on to leading a meaningful life, like your friend Paul.”

Kevin frowned. He had been thinking of Wendy as this perfect woman, but she had flaws like everyone else. He supposed it wasn’t fair to be judgmental since he got unfeeling at times on the job. After seeing death so often, it was easy to get numb to it.

“Anyway, I had to contact the family of the deceased. It’s the attending physician’s job, but he’s a big jerk and dumped it on me.”

Kevin walked to the kitchen, where she was preparing cornbread. He came from behind and hugged her, trying not to disrupt what she was doing. “I know what that’s like. I’ve had to

contact family members of murder victims more times than I care to remember. It's never easy, no matter how many times you do it."

After putting the cornbread into the oven, she turned and kissed him. Kevin closed his eyes and kissed her back.

"You have it worse than me. At least the people that die on me are usually sick to begin with. Death is a matter of when, not if. I imagine the shock level is a whole lot greater when somebody is murdered. Do you ever just want to stop doing this?"

"Not really," Kevin answered. "I took an oath to protect and defend. That's what I'm good at. Without this in my life, I would be lost, so I take the lumps and all the unpleasant stuff that goes along with it."

"I usually want to quit after I've been up for thirty straight hours." Wendy sighed. "Sometimes I get so physically and mentally tired, I can't even think straight."

"I would hate to have you working on me under those circumstances."

"Tell me about it. When you're put in that situation, it's impossible not to make mistakes."

They continued talking until the food was ready. She served the chili, cornbread, and a salad on her small kitchen table.

Kevin took a few bites, and quickly drained his glass of iced tea. "Holy smoke! This is seriously hot."

"I'm sorry. I hope I didn't make it too hot for you."

"Not at all. I'm just not used to eating food this spicy. It tastes great though."

Kevin pushed through the pain and continued eating. The last thing he wanted was for her to think she ruined dinner. Having lived on his own for a while, he had developed some culinary skills of his own. Next time, he would cook for her.

After they finished eating, Kevin helped with the dishes. Afterward, they sat on her couch and talked. The conversation felt natural and flowed easily, as if they had known each other for years. Before he knew it, he looked at his watch, and it was getting late.

He sighed. "I should be going. You need to sleep." He got up from the sofa and picked up his jacket.

Wendy grabbed his arm and pulled him back down. "Don't go." Her voice was filled with urgency. "Stay with me." She drew him toward her. He let all inhibitions go and kissed her fiercely.

She drew away from him. "Wow."

He put the jacket down, and swept her off her feet, forgetting about how lousy his day had been. "I'm not going anywhere."

Chapter XV

Dusk settled on the colorful landscape of Haight-Ashbury as Sly and his friends walked down the street passing stores that sold tie dye and hippie paraphernalia.

“So how much cash did we make?” Russ asked.

“A buck fifty,” Sly replied.

“Sweet,” Russ said.

Originally coming from a farm area in Iowa, Sly and his two buds wanted to discover the world after their graduation from high school the previous summer. After kicking around New Orleans, Texas, and Southern California, they settled on San Francisco. Hustling odd jobs to make money, tonight, they handed out fliers and recruited people to go to a local club. Their main source of money came was still Sly’s parents, who had major bucks and still had not given up on him as he tried to discover himself. Most nights, they camped at a beach, or slept in Sly’s van, unless they found friends to stay with.

They walked down Haight Street on their way to Golden Gate Park, where they had parked Sly’s van.

“What do you say we roll down to Half Moon Bay and go hang with Jenny and her friends?” Russ glanced at Mick.

Mick had a glazed look in his eyes. “Yeah. Let’s do it.”

“You just want to score with that sweet looking blonde that was hanging with them,” Sly said.

Russ shrugged as they approached the van.

“Let’s smoke a little before we roll,” Sly said. “Get a head start on the night.”

Sly had carefully concealed the drugs they had purchased earlier that day in his worn denim jacket. Although the cops around here were pretty lax, he didn’t want to take chances. His parents would cut him off for sure if he got arrested.

Sly unlocked his van, and they went inside.

“So what did we get from the Candy Man?” Russ asked.

Sly opened the bag. “We have a dime bag of some home grown, acid, and shrooms.”

Sly passed around the bong to Russ, and they took turns inhaling.

Sly lifted up a bag of pills. “Check it out. I scored some X.”

Russ’s face lit up. “Sweet. That might come in handy later tonight.”

Sly opened the door to let some air back into the van. He scanned for cops, then opened the doors fully. The sky had turned dark.

Mick stepped out of the van and giggled. “Let’s get some air, man. It’s all like static in there. We need to like get into the great wide open.”

Sly yelled into the van, “Hey, Russ, we’re going to the park.”

Russ straggled out of the van with wobbly legs. Lightweight.

Sly rolled his eyes at his two friends as they walked to the park. They couldn’t even walk straight. The night air was chilled and misty. Sly wanted to clear his head before they headed out tonight. As they entered the park, it began to drizzle. He looked at his watch, wishing he had brought an umbrella.

After walking for ten minutes, they found themselves outside of the Japanese Tea Garden. The drizzle had subsided.

Russ wobbled from side to side as he walked. “I need to sit.” He almost crashed into a nearby bench. “I’m so baked.”

“Yeah dude, you are.” Mick sat on another bench. “I’m hungry. Let’s get some burgers or something. And some fries. You know what I could go for—a chilidog. Yeah that would be cool.”

“Let’s wait until we get down to Jenny’s,” Sly said. “I’m sure they have some grub over there.”

“All right, dude.” Mick giggled.

Sly walked closer to the entrance to the Japanese Tea Gardens. He found it trippy inside. The sound of branches snapping startled him. “What’s that?”

“What’s what?” Russ stared up at the stars.

Sly walked over to them. Russ looked pretty useless so he approached Mick. “Did you hear something?”

“Only this dude babbling.” He pointed to Russ who was mumbling something incoherent. “Why?”

Sly shrugged. “I thought I heard something. I hope it’s not a cop. If they see Russ they might just take us in for public intoxication.”

Mick glanced at Russ. “You know, he can’t handle his high these days.”

“Yeah. We should probably hold back on him before he gets loco.”

Mick got off the bench and walked with Sly toward the Tea Garden. “And he got us fired from that last job at the car wash. He would just wander off and not even tell anybody where he was going. He’s got to get a grip, man.”

“I know, dude.”

Russ stared into the sky, observing all the neat things the night had to offer. “Those stars are so cool. Look at those...what are they, constellations? Yeah. You know, we’re so small down here in comparison to those stars. But then again, if you look at it from where we’re at, the stars are the ones that look small. That’s so wild. It’s all about the irony, man. See, we’re small to them, but they’re small to us. It’s like one wild circle.”

Russ’s attention shifted to a fascinating figure nearby. “Woh. Hey, Sly, that must have been some seriously good stuff. I don’t think I’ve ever seen anything quite this cool. Dude, you’re like something out of a horror movie. Did I see you in Alien or something? What’s up with those snakes, man? Mick, Sly, you guys have to check this out. This is way cool.”

“What does he want now?” Sly asked Mick.

“Beats me.” Mick turned and gave an ear piercing shriek.

Turning, Sly gaped at the nightmare in front of him. “What the fuck is that?”

“Get up, Russ. Get up!” Sly yelled.

A monstrous figure, eight feet in height, stood behind Russ. It had muscular, tree-trunk legs, powerful thighs, and a trim waistline covered with thick, coarse fur along. Eight snakes, ranging from three to five feet in length, jutted out of its abdomen. They twirled in the air with piercing eyes and venomous fangs. One of them was close enough to ooze saliva onto Russ’s face. The snakes moved in different directions, as if each had a mind of its own. Along with broad shoulders, the creature had muscular arms and massive hands with razor-sharp nails over three inches long. A giant snake-head protruded from the top of its torso, the size of a large python.

Mick continued to scream at the top of his lungs.

Sly watched in revulsion as the creature extended its snake-head toward them. Fully extended, the head had to reach twenty feet. It stuck its serpent tongue out and hissed.

After the snake contracted, Sly woke from his daze. Mick looked paralyzed with fear. Sly slapped Mick’s face.

Russ said, “How did you do that thing with your head, man? That’s really cool. I wish I could do that. You could like stretch your head across the room. That would be...”

The giant snake-head dove at Russ’s neck and drove its fangs into his neck. The snake-head ripped into Russ’s throat. With its right hand, the creature plunged its nails into his chest and tore his abdomen. It grabbed his left leg with its powerful arms and ripped it off. The head started tearing the flesh off Russ’s leg down to the bone, consuming flesh in the process. The outline of Russ’s flesh moved down the snake-head and into the creature’s abdomen.

Sly grabbed Mick. “Let’s get the fuck out of here.”

They turned to run. With amazing agility, the creature leaped

over the bench and lunged at Sly. It shredded his back with his nails and sent him crashing into a large rock.

The smaller snakes shot out from the creature's abdomen toward Mick. He shrieked in pain as the snakes bit him repeatedly. The snake-head wrapped itself around Mick and drew him closer. The creature severed his head with its two hands, cutting off Mick's scream. It sounded like it was popping a cork off a bottle.

The snake-head let go of Mick. He began convulsing on the ground, flapping back and forth as if having an epileptic seizure. Using its massive foot, the beast stepped on his moving body. The smaller snakes slithered down and started eating his flesh.

Still groggy, Sly tried to make it to his feet. His brain told his legs to move, but they would not respond. He tried to use his skinny arms to prop himself up. He nearly succeeded, before his arms gave out on him. He crawled to the rock and sat himself against it. With fierce determination, he stood and began walking away from his two dead friends and the beast.

The creature continued feasting. Sly glanced back, thinking he just might have a chance to escape, until the creature turned its attention on him. It whipped its right leg at Sly in a sweeping motion, knocking him off his feet. The snake-head used its massive fangs to rip into his lower back, tearing his spinal cord.

The creature stepped back and stared at its victims, pleased with its work. It took a moment to savor its victims' pain, then gathered the three bodies, threw them into a patch of woods surrounding the Japanese Tea Gardens, and left.

Chapter XVI

Captain Lawyer Bishop stormed into Kevin's office with a mean scowl on his face. He slammed a copy of the San Francisco Chronicle on Kevin's desk. "How the hell did this happen?"

The headline jumped out at Kevin. Gruesome Murder Shocks Quiet Neighborhood. Underneath it read Star Detective Investigates Scene. Two startling photographs covered the front page. The first was a blurred version of the mutilated body of Danielle Bloch. The second picture was Kevin exiting the back of the house.

"God dammit! I didn't want any of this information released to the public, and there it is, right on the front page for everyone to see. My phone has been ringing off the hook. Everyone from the mayor to the police commissioner to civic leaders wants to know what the hell's happening and what we're going to do about it."

Kevin shook his head. "I have no idea how this happened. No one was in the house other than the investigation team when I arrived on the scene. The officers assured me that no one else had entered the premises. After I finished my investigation, I left through the back of the house. I didn't see a soul. This son of a bitch must have been hiding out to get a picture of me. Did you contact Berehowsky and Martaugh?"

"Yeah. They're pleading ignorance as well." Bishop's eyes narrowed. "Do you know what this means?"

"The press will have a field day. People are going to be running scared. Business and tourism will suffer."

"Exactly," Bishop said. "All of the things that are going to make my life hell."

"I wish I knew how this reporter got those pictures." Kevin looked at the newspaper once again. The name on the byline caught his attention. Matt Szatko. Mental images ran through Kevin's head, then it hit him. "The asshole who wrote this article followed me into my car yesterday. He was harassing me, trying to get an interview. I

told him that I couldn't, but he wouldn't take no for an answer and followed into my car. I had to stop myself from stomping a mudhole in his ass. That son of a bitch."

Captain Bishop sighed. "If you were a little more cooperative with the media, then this wouldn't happen. You know it wouldn't hurt to give an interview or a sound bite every once in a while."

"Can we do anything to this puke?" Kevin asked.

"What? Like smash his head in with a Louisville slugger?"

"No," Kevin said. "I was thinking about legal action."

"He didn't do anything illegal. Plus the damage is done. Now that the article is in print, there's nothing we can do but damage control."

"Wonderful." Kevin leaned back and covered his eyes with his hands. He had enough on his plate without having to deal with another media barrage.

Bishop sat down. "So what killed this woman?"

"I wish I knew. I had a wildlife expert in yesterday to examine the body as well as the physical evidence, and his conclusion was that no animal could have done this. It sure wasn't done by a person."

Bishop's brow furrowed. "Well where does this leave us?"

"I have some thoughts."

"And?"

"I can't tell you just yet."

"You can't tell me just yet?" Bishop got off of his seat. "Well in that case I might as well just go home. What do you mean you can't tell me just yet? I need to know what's going on here. What am I going to tell the commissioner and the mayor? If you have something, I need it."

Kevin looked away from Bishop. How could he share his crazy ideas? "You're going to have to give me some slack on this one."

"Where have I heard that one before? Kevin, I'm starting to worry about you. You're overextending yourself. You've been through so much in the past month, working crazy hours, not getting

much sleep. I want to pull you off this assignment so you can concentrate on helping the DA build a case against Ray Holman.”

Kevin had anticipated this. He gritted his teeth. He knew Captain Bishop had his best interest at heart and he expressed genuine concern, but he had to be on this case. He owed it to Paul and the victims. He knew he could crack it. “I know my limitations, and I’m not going to kill myself over my work, but I’m your best detective, and you know it. If anyone can figure out this mess, it’s me.”

Lawyer Bishop paced the room. “I’m keeping you on a short leash. If you start to falter, then I’m gonna pull you and I don’t want to hear any arguments.”

“Fair enough. Just give me a chance. That’s all I ask for.”

Bishop nodded and left his office. Kevin took the copy of the newspaper and read through the story, remembering that little worm of a reporter who wrote it. He thought when he had left the house, no one was around, but Matt Szatko must have been lurking nearby.

Kevin wanted to ask Paul more questions about the night he was attacked. He also wanted to see if he could find any similar deaths within the region but had a hard time concentrating. The newspaper article gnawed at him like a tooth ache.

It took five phone calls to reach the reporter. Szatko was not a staffer on the San Francisco Chronicle, so he was not at their main number. Since he was a stringer for the paper, Kevin had to reach him on his cell.

When Szatko finally picked up the phone, Kevin’s anger erupted. “You miserable little puke. Do you realize the damage you caused with your article and picture?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Szatko said. “I was merely performing a service for the citizens of the Bay Area. They need to know about this.”

“All you accomplished is cause panic. Not to mention you tampered with a police investigation.”

“You’re just trying to control information,” Szatko said. “You have no right to do that. I am nothing more than a beacon of light for the Bay Area.”

“You’re nothing more than a sleazy piece of crap. If you were concerned about people, then you would know that you’re making things worse.”

“We’re not living in the former Soviet Union, and I won’t let you suppress information.”

“If it’s up to me, then we’ll take legal action over this.” Kevin knew that this was not going to happen but hoped the threat would deter the reporter. “And if I were you I would watch my back. Because if I see you, I’m going to take that camera and stick it far up your ass. Got it?” Kevin slammed the phone onto its receiver.

Matt shook his head as the line went dead. “Self-righteous prick.”

He knew Russell’s type. The jock in high school and college who always got his way. The type that always got the girl, always got special treatment from teachers, and later management. Matt knew full well that type since they had bullied him relentlessly growing up. Well, he wasn’t a kid anymore, and he wasn’t afraid of assholes like Detective Russell. He might still be slight in stature and lack physical strength, but he wielded a mighty pen, or in this case, a mighty laptop. He had the power of words, and that was greater than strength or physical skill.

He looked at the photograph he had taken of Danielle Bloch, the one the newspaper should have used. In the photo, Danielle Bloch’s misshapen face could be seen in stark detail. Many of her teeth were missing and her hair had been ripped out of her head. That was mild in comparison to the rest of her body. Someone or something had bitten a massive chunk off her thigh, and numerous bite marks lined her body. Her belly had been split down the middle

and her entrails had spilled out. Her flesh was a dark shade of purple, probably poison. He couldn't imagine what had done this.

Despite the gruesome nature of it, he could not help but to be pleased. This was a story for the ages, and he had uncovered it. This was the break he needed to launch his career, and no one would stop him. Not some lousy editor, not the golden boy detective, no one.

The man in the dirty gray pants and blue shirt carried the morning edition of the San Francisco Chronicle to his place of solitude. Most people would not consider this a quiet place. In the background, the large clanking of boiler room machinery sounded. Despite that, this was his special place. It allowed him to drown out the rest of the world. Everywhere else, noisy people carried on, but not here. This was his private domain.

Normally unconcerned about current events, this was the first newspaper he had purchased in nearly a decade. Walking to work, the cover of the newspaper reached out and grabbed him. The photo of the dead woman made him do a double take.

Not wanting anyone to witness him reading the paper, he waited until he reached his place of solitude to read it. He balled his hands into fists as he read the article accompanying the photo. The byline indicated it was written by Matt Szatko, no doubt a man of great journalistic skill. This reporter was putting his nose where it did not belong, something that could have very dire consequences. He liked this area and did not intend on leaving so soon, which meant he would have to deal with the writer.

After he finished reading, the photo of the police officer investigating the case caught his attention. The cop looked familiar. Why? He searched his memory, but could not place him.

Later that day as he passed a lounge with a television, he figured it out. He had seen the man on television. He was cop who arrested the rapist. This detective had to be sharp to arrest the rapist. Well, this would make the game all the more interesting. A smile crept

onto his face. If this detective was too smart and too proficient at his job, then there would be consequences. There would be consequences indeed.

Chapter XVII

For the two days after Alex visited Manny at Stanford, he managed to avoid his normal circle of friends. When Jorge approached him, Alex pretended he had to be elsewhere.

Alex tried to remain invisible. During class, he kept to himself. When school was over, he hurried home before anybody had a chance to catch up to him.

His classmates did not speak about the incident, as if it had never gone down. Still, the tension between the two groups ran high.

Alex took Manny's words to heart. He would stop hanging with his old friends. For now, his plan was to stay away from them and pretend he was busy. They would eventually get the idea that he was no longer their friend.

His plan had been going well until recess on the third day.

A hand clamped on Alex's shoulder. He turned to find Saleen. "Ain't seen you for a while. What's goin' on?"

Alex shrugged. "Not much. Just busy doin' stuff."

"That's cool," Saleen said. "You're still my boy. Hey about what happened the other day, things got heavy, but it's all good now."

"Yeah I know." For the first time in his life, Alex wanted recess to end early.

"When things get tough, that's when you have to rely on your friends the most. That's what it's all about."

"I hear you."

"So me and Jorge are headin' up to the mall after class. You wanna go."

Alex's mind raced to find an excuse. "No, I can't. My grandparents are coming over today, and mom wants me to spend time with them. You know, they're old and they like that sort of thing. I'm already in trouble at home, so I don't wanna push it."

Alex spent the rest of the afternoon in a daze. When his

Geography class ended, his teacher asked him if he was okay. He said he felt ill. Maybe he could fake being sick tomorrow and miss school.

Alex trudged through the never ending day. When he heard the final bell ring, he lingered longer than usual. At his locker, he pretended to contemplate which books to take home. By the time he finished selecting his books, most of the other students had left, and the hallways were quiet.

On his way out he passed the gym. At the far end of the hallway, he saw Farrell's janitor, Juan Antonio Bojorquez, mopping the floor. Alex could not get him out of his mind. What happened the other day was surreal. When Saleen and Terron were engaged in a life and death struggle, the janitor diffused the situation with ease. If the school's administrators knew the janitor had threatened the kids, they would probably fire him.

Alex stared at the man mopping the floor. His hair was wild and uncombed. He had two days growth of facial hair. His stained shirt half hung out of his pants. Alex thought about asking the man why he had intervened the way he had, but decided against it.

Best to avoid the janitor and go home. His mom would be happy to see him doing his homework.

Rosa Marquez went home after cleaning the Friedman house. She had half an hour before starting her shift at The Cantina.

Over the past few days she had become increasingly worried about Alejandro. He barely spoke. When she tried to talk to him, he was unresponsive. He had not even asked once if he could spend time with his friends. Something had happened to him. Rosa did all she could to make the lives of her boys easier and deflect any unnecessary worry from them. She lived a difficult life without complaint so they would not have to.

She did not know what to do about Alejandro. Not wanting to take Manuel away from his studies, she called her late husband's

father. Pedro and his wife, Gabriela, lived in San Diego. Pedro tended the grounds and gardened at a retirement community, while Gabriela worked as a cook in the home's kitchen. They moved from Mexico over twenty years ago with their three children. Her late husband, José, had been seventeen at the time.

Rosa grew up in Tijuana. She had worked in San Diego, just across the Mexican border, taking the bus every day to work. There she met José. He delivered groceries from a wholesaler to local stores, while Rosa worked at a small Mexican-owned store that was on José's route. He did his best to charm her during his stops, but she was timid and did not reciprocate his advances.

José won her heart forever when one day on her break she was eating lunch at a nearby playground. A local drug dealer started harassing her. When she tried to stop his advances, he slapped her, drawing blood from her mouth. Rosa screamed. Jose happened to drive by. He pulled up at the curb. Without hesitation, he got out with a crowbar in hand. He approached the drug dealer and using his right arm, grabbed him by the shoulder and turned him around. He swung the crowbar and connected with the man's skull.

With the man bleeding on the ground, José walked Rosa back to the store. He was a complete gentleman and did not ask for anything in return. Rosa, however, knew that this was the man for her. He would always protect her and love her. He did until the day he died.

It took a few minutes for Rosa to get Pedro on the phone. "Rosa, it's so good for you to call." The warmth in his voice radiated over the phone. Whenever Pedro and his wife visited, they doted over the boys and treated her like a surrogate daughter.

"How are you, Pedro?"

"Good, good," Pedro replied. "My back is getting worse, but I manage. It's not easy to move around so much anymore."

Pedro had led a hard life, working on a farm in Mexico from the age of seven. After immigrating to the United States, he worked as a construction worker and later as a laborer on a farm.

Rosa told him about what had been going on with Alejandro. "I

would like for you and your wife to visit and stay for a few days; maybe a week. I need help finding out what's wrong with Alejandro. Sometimes it's good to have another voice. I know he loves you both."

In his relaxed voice, Pedro said, "We would love to go. We have vacation time coming. What better way to use it then to see our grandson. We'll leave Friday after work."

"Thank you. It means a lot to me."

"My flowers are calling. See you soon."

Rosa looked at her watch. She had to get to work. On her way out, she left a note for Alejandro. She sighed. He was going down a bad road. She had to do something to save her son. If only he would confide in her.

Chapter XVIII

Kevin pressed the accelerator of his Pathfinder. Pure dread filled him after receiving the call that woke him from a deep slumber.

There was little traffic on the roads at this ungodly hour, so he made it to Golden Gate Park in no time. He knew the park well, having jogged there many times. The only ones at the scene of the crime were three police officers and the homeless person who discovered the bodies.

After talking to the officers, Kevin took the homeless man aside and sat him on a park bench. The man had a dazed look on his face. Fortunately, he appeared sober.

“Can you tell me what you saw when you got here,” Kevin said.

“Do you have a cigarette?” the man asked. “I could really use a cigarette.”

Kevin sighed. “Hold on.” He got a cigarette and a lighter from an officer on the scene, handed it to the man, and waited patiently as he lit the cigarette.

The man’s hand shook as he held the cigarette. “I was... I was picking some bottles and cans over there.” He pointed to a trash receptacle. “Then this smell coming from those bushes hit me. I went to check it out, and that’s when I saw those kids. Goddamn, I’ve never seen nothin’ like that before.”

The man began weeping. He took a deep drag from the cigarette before composing himself and continuing. “I found that lady with the cell and got her to dial 911. I waited ‘til the cops got here, but I couldn’t go back there where those kids were. God, I could use a drink.”

Kevin cleared his throat. “No drinking. I need your head to be clear.”

The homeless man nodded. “At first, the cops didn’t believe me. Then I took them to the bushes, and they saw for themselves. Poor fucking kids. What the hell did that to them?”

“That’s what we’re trying to find out,” Kevin said. “I know this is tough, but you have to stay with me.”

Kevin finished his interview with the homeless man, then talked to the two officers who had first arrived on the scene. Judging by Officer Fowler’s pale face, Kevin guessed he didn’t have much experience seeing dead bodies.

“What do we know about the deceased?” Kevin asked.

With glazed eyes, Officer Davis replied, “Their names are Mick Williams, Sylvester Clark, and Russell Peterson. They were carrying these.” Davis handed him a stack of three wallets. “They have no past criminal records and no permanent residence in California.”

Kevin nodded. “Drifters.” He knew the type. They were common along the West Coast.

“You’re going to notify the families, right?” Davis asked.

“Sure. Listen. We need to keep this quiet. That includes Norman.” Kevin motioned toward the homeless man. “There’s a rehab center in the Presidio.” Kevin jotted down an address on an index card and handed it to Davis. “Take him there, check him in, have him cleaned up, and keep a close eye on him.”

It took Kevin nearly two hours to complete his investigation. Unfortunately, there was no physical evidence to link to the previous victims, however, the condition of the bodies left him convinced that these killings were done by the same perp. Despite the obvious differences in the conditions between these three bodies and Danielle Bloch’s, they were similarly mutilated.

He had to keep this story contained. He was tempted to look into the bushes to see if Matt Szatko was lurking. Kevin had dealt with reporters before, but none that sleazy.

After bagging the bodies, Kevin left the scene. He wished he could concentrate all of his efforts in finding out who had killed these three kids and Danielle Bloch. Unfortunately, he was still heavily involved with the Ray Holman case. Yesterday, Holman had his hearing to determine if there would be a jury trial. Kevin saw no point in attending since the hearing was a formality. No judge in the

country would dismiss this case before sending it to a jury trial. Rita Tedesco told him that prosecutor Derek Johnson was dazzling and had Holman's lawyer on the defensive. Kevin may not have liked Johnson on a personal level, but he was glad to have him on his side.

He and Johnson had been in contact every day this week. The attorney was diligent and well-prepared. Kevin had little doubt they would come out on top.

The warden of Holman's prison informed Kevin that Holman requested to speak to him and ceased communication with his lawyer. The plot thickens. From the first time he questioned the suspect, he was convinced he could break him down. This would be his chance.

Instead of catering to Ray Holman's wishes, Kevin made him wait. He told the warden he would meet Holman before the week was over, but only if his attorney wasn't present.

He dialed Paul's number on his cell. They had only briefly spoken since his release from the hospital. He was starting to believe that Paul wasn't delusional after all. Whatever had attacked him was likely the same thing that killed Danielle Bloch and the three youths in Golden Gate Park.

The phone rang twice before Paul answered. "Hey you caught me on the way out."

"Where are you heading so early in the morning?"

"I'm getting my stitches removed by a certain doctor friend of yours. You are one lucky bastard."

"Yeah, yeah." Just thinking about Wendy made his pulse race. This wasn't an ideal time to be falling too deep into a relationship, but he had as little control over that as he had over breathing.

"So, what's going on?" Paul asked.

"I wanted to see how you were doing, not to mention I need to ask some questions about the other night."

"What other night?"

"When you got smacked in the head and were nearly killed."

"Oh, that other night. Swing by later if you want."

"Or I can go to the hospital now and meet you. I'm in the

neighborhood.”

“That works. We’ll grab some breakfast afterwards. My treat. There’s this place outside of Pacific Heights that one of my co-workers has been raving about.”

“See you soon.” Kevin hung up. He leaned back and closed his eyes. He had no idea what he was chasing, and that was what worried him.

Kevin pulled his car into the parking lot of the St. Francis Medical Center. He had been here so often lately that he recognized much of the staff.

Somewhere inside, Wendy was working. They had not seen each other in three days and he was eager to see her again. Tomorrow night they had plans to catch a movie on the Wharf and go to Ghirardelli’s Square afterward.

He walked past the Emergency Room and saw a nurse he recognized. “Excuse me, Sharon, can you tell me where I can find Dr. Davis?”

Sharon regarded him quizzically. “She’s seeing a patient right now.”

“Is that patient Paul Richardson?”

She nodded.

Kevin smiled. “Perfect. I need to see them both.”

Sharon hesitated, so he flashed his badge at her. “It’s official business.”

“Oh. In that case, let me show you where they are.”

“Thank you.” Kevin followed Sharon to a room. He was always amazed at how people’s attitudes changed when they discovered he was a cop, except it wasn’t always for the better.

Entering the room, he studied Wendy removing his stitches. She had a graceful touch and elegance in her movements. She was born to do this job.

Paul winced. Kevin stepped across the room and put his hand

on his shoulder. “Come on. I thought you were supposed to be a tough guy.”

Paul attempted to turn, but Wendy kept him still.

“Don’t move. You don’t want me to jab you with these scissors.” Wendy looked up. “Hey, Kev. How are you doing?”

He smiled. “Much better now.”

She continued removing Paul’s stitches.

Sitting on a chair in the corner of the room, he watched her steady hands at work. When she finished, he walked over and looked at Paul’s face. “You almost look like a normal person now. Just a couple of days ago, you looked like a freak.”

Wendy turned and made a mock threatening gesture with the scissors.

“Thanks, pal,” Paul went to a mirror and took a close look above his left eye where the gash had been.

“So anyway,” Kevin said, “I wanted to talk to you about the other night.”

Paul stepped away from the mirror and frowned. “Shouldn’t we talk about this somewhere else?”

Kevin waved his hand. “It’s okay. She can hear this.”

Wendy closed the door and sat next to the bed.

“Look, what I tell the two of you can’t leave this room,” Kevin said. “I suppose that you heard about the woman from Russian Hill who died.”

Wendy nodded. “Yeah. It was impossible to miss.”

“Well, today I investigated the killings of three teens in Golden Gate Park. Their bodies were in similar condition to the woman. I think that whoever attacked you was the same that killed those four.”

Paul’s face turned white. He spoke slowly and carefully. “I wasn’t attacked by a person. I was attacked by a werewolf.”

“A werewolf?” Wendy’s eyes went wide.

Kevin said, “I don’t know what nearly killed you, but I’m pretty certain it wasn’t a person. Was it a werewolf? The evidence doesn’t support that. I can tell you that what happened to those four victims

is horrific and incomprehensible. There were slashes, snakebites, and the victims were strangled. None of these things could have been done by a person or an animal. This may not have been a werewolf, but I think it's something nobody has ever seen or even heard of before. Whatever it is, it's still out there, and I have to find it. I have to stop it before more people die, so I need to know every detail of what happened.”

Paul retold his story. Wendy looked at him in horror as he spoke.

Every once in a while, Kevin asked his friend to clarify something, but otherwise let him speak. Paul's original story had not changed. He didn't mention anything that resembled a snake, although there clearly were snakebites with the four other victims. He also didn't mention anything that could have caused constriction. Was it possible that an entirely different creature had attacked him? He shuddered at the thought of having two of these to deal with.

“Kevin, you know I wouldn't lie to you about this. I'm telling you it was a werewolf. I know you don't believe me, but at least look into the possibility. I know what I saw.”

Kevin was about to argue with Paul, but he had never seen him so adamant about anything.

“Please, Kevin. Do it.”

Kevin sighed. “I'm not ruling anything out right now. If it is a werewolf, then I have to find out everything I can about them. I'm going to visit a library this weekend. Any suggestions?”

“Try the university library at Stanford,” Wendy said. “They have large resource of information.”

Kevin sighed. “What do I have to lose, besides my dignity?”

Wendy held his hand. “I'm afraid.”

Kevin wished he could say something to console her, but the truth was he was scared as well.

Chapter XIX

Kevin spent his Saturday afternoon surfing the Internet trying to find information about werewolves and other mythical creatures that might be responsible for these recent killings. If Bishop knew what he was doing, he would pull Kevin off the case in a heartbeat.

While researching werewolves, Kevin kept asking himself just what the hell he was doing. He reminded himself of a quote he lived by—“When you have ruled out the impossible, then the truth must be whatever remains, regardless of how improbable.”

Kevin did not consider himself a superstitious man, nor did he give credence to the occult or witchcraft. It was tough for him to get rid of his inner skeptic, but he had to consider the possibility that something supernatural was at work here.

He scoured through the online edition of the San Francisco Chronicle as well as several other newspapers. So far, they had nothing on what happened in the park. It was only a matter of time before the press sunk their grimy hands into that story.

After getting nowhere researching on the web, he drove to the station to find Rita Tedesco. She left several messages for him over the past couple of days. When she wasn't at her desk, he walked to her favorite hangout—the shooting range—and found her pumping bullets into a target.

Kevin waited until she finished unloading her round of bullets before walking toward her. She turned, a big smile on her face. Rita pulled off her ear covers. “Let's go somewhere a little quieter.”

“You don't miss often, do you?”

Rita shrugged. “I try not to. Someday it will be a bad guy on the other end. Haven't seen you around much lately. Rumor has it you're on another big case, not that you've told me.”

Kevin waited until they were inside the station. “This one's trickier than the last one.”

“And that was no picnic.” Rita frowned. “You don't seem yourself. You never let your work get to you. It's one of your more

charming characteristics.”

“Come inside.” He motioned to his office. They entered. He sat on his desk and Rita stood in front of him. “This nut’s gonna be hard to crack. Have you heard what happened at Golden Gate Park?”

“Only that three died. No details.”

Kevin filled her in his investigation and its similarities to the Danielle Bloch case.

Rita wore a severe frown. “Sweet Jesus. What the hell’s going on?”

Kevin tilted his head back and sighed. “Wish I knew. I’ve never seen or heard anything like this, and I don’t know where to begin to look for clues. I think the perp is the same one that nearly killed Paul.”

“Is there anything I can do to help you out?” she asked.

“Maybe. Whatever this thing is doing the killings, it couldn’t have spawned out of nowhere. There has to be similar unsolved murders. Can you research this for me, starting in California? Then go on to other parts of the country.”

Rita put her hand on his shoulder. “I’ll give it a try. Do you think I’ll actually come up with something?”

“It can’t hurt to look. Right now, I’m baffled.

“If anyone can crack this case, it’s you. So how are things going with that lady doctor friend of yours?”

“Good. Really good. I think I might actually have something here that I want to hold onto.”

“What did I tell you?” She pinched his cheeks. “This one’s a keeper. Just don’t get too wrapped up in your work and lose her. I know you sometimes lose track when you’re deep in a case, but remember there are more important things than work.”

“Right now, there isn’t anything more important to me than stopping this killer. Four dead in the past week. Where’s it going to end? I need divine intervention.

“Can’t help you with the divine intervention,” she said.

“Guess who I’m going to see today?”

“Who?”

“Your boy.”

“My boy?” she asked.

“Ray Holman.”

“He’s not my boy.”

“He certainly seemed to like you.”

Rita shook her head. “I can’t believe he tried to break into my house. What I wouldn’t give to jack up that scumbag.”

“Don’t worry. His conviction is all but a done deal.”

“He’ll probably get off on an insanity verdict.”

“No chance,” Kevin said. “We’re going to nail the son of a bitch.”

When the guards brought out Holman, he greeted Kevin warmly like an old friend with a firm handshake and a smile. Kevin had no idea why Holman had latched onto him, but he would use it in his favor.

“How have they been treating you?” Kevin asked.

Holman laughed. “Are you kidding? I’m the resident celebrity. They’re treating me with kid gloves. Do you have any cigarettes?”

Although Kevin did not smoke, he always brought cigarettes with him when interviewing prisoners. He took out a fresh pack of Marlboro Lights and opened the box. He gave one to Ray and put the rest on the table. Ray put it in his mouth, and Kevin lit the cigarette for him.

“Ah, a good smoke.” Ray exhaled. “It’s one of the few things you can enjoy in prison.” He took another inhale, turned, and blew out smoke. “So do they talk about me a lot in the outside world?”

“You’re a big star. Newspapers, magazines, talk shows, television, you name it. You’re all over the Internet. I saw Dr. Phil talking about you the other day.” Kevin made up the last part, but

that was the only famous talk show host he could think of off the top of his head.

“Wow.” Holman smiled. “Maybe it wasn’t so bad letting you catch me. Before, I was doing important work, but it was done in obscurity. Now I have achieved infamy. What can be more important than that?”

“Doing the right thing,” Kevin responded.

Ray puffed on the cigarette.

Kevin kept his anger from rising.

“You know who I saw the other day?”

Ray shook his head. “The Pope?”

“No. Your Aunt Mallory.”

Ray’s face darkened. “That woman was an evil witch. Whatever she said, don’t believe it. She never cared for me. I was always the bad one. I always did the wrong thing. I was never good enough for her. I should have done something about her back then.”

Kevin sensed he hit a nerve. “That must have been tough for you. Your parents died, and then you had to live with Aunt Mallory, who never loved you. Not like your mother did.”

“No. She did not.” Ray spoke in a low tone, barely above a whisper.

Kevin worked on a hunch he formed from reading the old police reports and talking to some of the investigating officers. “What I don’t understand was why you killed your parents?”

Ray looked down at the floor, his face contorted with grief and sorrow.

“It’s all right, Ray. I get it. Your mother used to punish you. When you were bad she made you take your clothes off and recite the Hail Mary. Then she would whip you with a leather belt. You felt ashamed. Meanwhile, your father did nothing. He was a hard worker but also a hard drinker. He never stopped her from hurting you. You loved your mother but could no longer take it. So when they were asleep one night, you set a fire, which burned the house down. You lived, but both of your parents died. You killed them.”

Holman began to whimper.

Kevin waited patiently.

“I was only fourteen. I...I didn’t want them to die. Mother was just punishing me. Everybody needs punishment. But once it was done, it couldn’t be undone. I tried to put the fire out, but I couldn’t. When the police came it was too late.” The whimpering now became crying.

Kevin could feel the momentum building. It was like he was in a heavyweight fight. It was in the tenth round and he had the champion on the ropes, peppering him with punches. Now he had to go in for the knockout. Instead of going for the big uppercut, he set his opponent up with some shots to the body.

“I know.” Kevin said. “They were dead, and there was nothing to do.”

“I pretended it was an accident. What else could I do?” Ray finished the first cigarette, so Kevin took out another one, gave it to Ray, and lit it for him.

“You spoke of punishment. Your mother punished you. Is that what you did to those women, Ray? They were bad, and you had to punish them.” Kevin had been recording the conversation with Holman’s consent. The admission that he murdered his parents would establish that he was capable of killing the women.

Suddenly, Holman’s face contorted. “What do you know about punishment?” He took a deep drag on his cigarette.

“I’m an officer of the law. I know all about crime and punishment.”

Holman’s facial features softened. “Then why would you arrest me?”

“You broke the law. Now you’re facing your punishment, just like those women you killed.”

“But the law of God is more important than the laws that these corrupt politicians, lawyers, and judges have made.”

“Of course it is. But this is the law that our society has created, and you have to play by the rules.”

Once again there was silence in the interview room.

Finally Holman said, "I had to punish those women. They were wicked. God is on my side, and he will see me through it."

Kevin's pulse began to pound. There it was. Ray had just confessed to the murders. Now Kevin had to go for the knockout blow. "By punishing them you mean that you raped and killed these women?"

"Yes. What better punishment could there be?"

Kevin nodded. "Ray, I want you to look at some pictures. I want to know if you punished these women."

Ray frowned.

"I just want to make sure they're not missing. If you punished them, then we know they're not missing and can stop looking. I would appreciate it if you helped me out."

Holman sighed. "I'll try."

One by one, Kevin produced pictures of the victims prior to their murders. With each picture, Holman nodded in agreement. The last picture he produced was Rita's.

Holman's face sagged. "She was the one that got away. Oh how I would have loved to make her mine."

Kevin had to stop himself from leaping out of his chair and tearing Holman's throat out. He could kill the man without breaking a sweat and would enjoy doing it. Instead he put away the pictures.

He took a document out of his briefcase. "One last thing, Ray. I just want to make this official. It's just paperwork. You know how those damn beurocrats are. They want records of everything. This is to verify everything you told me."

Kevin produced a document that he had generated on Wednesday when he thought he could break down Holman. It was a confession to the rape and murders that he committed. Ray took the pen and signed his name. It was official now. He could put this case to rest and concentrate on his new killer, something far more dangerous than Ray Holman. "Time to go, Ray."

"When will you be returning? I would like to talk some more"

“Return? You’re a disgusting, pathetic, miserable fuck. You’re the lowest form of life, Ray. And I’m going to enjoy watching you rot in jail.”

Kevin put the document in his briefcase and left the prison.

Chapter XX

Matt couldn't believe what he was reading. The police report on the most recent attack containing the details of the deaths of Mick Williams, Sylvester Clark and Russell Peterson was almost beyond comprehension. What the hell happened to these kids? The report said they had snake bites all over their bodies. Furthermore, they had venom in their blood stream. The venom matched what had been found in Danielle Bloch's body. Then it got really weird. The bodies had massive, gaping wounds as if an animal with large, sharp claws attacked them. Two of the boys showed signs of constriction and the other had enormous welts across his legs and back. One kid had even been burned. Jesus, Mary, and Joseph. It was like the zoo of terror had been unleashed on them.

Normally, he would attack a story like this with gusto, but he couldn't help but feel queasy. With this police report, his article in the front page of the Sunday edition of the San Francisco Chronicle would be dynamite, especially after he linked their deaths to Danielle Bloch's killer. This story was going to sell more papers than they could print. Despite the newspaper business being a relic of the past, circulation dramatically increased since his first article and hits on the paper's website were setting records.

How he got this report was a sordid tale of deceit, trickery, bribery, and blackmail. In the end he got what he wanted, and the people of San Francisco would get what they needed. They would get the truth, and he was their messenger.

Matt pieced together the article's lead. It was going to be chilling. He might even earn a Pulitzer. Before long, Matt Szatko would be a household name. As an added bonus, the Golden Boy was going to throw a fit when he read the article. He would probably put his fist through a wall.

By the time Matt finished, he was convinced it was the finest piece of journalism ever written. This had Pulitzer written all over it.

He needed fresh air, not to mention a release after he finished writing the article, and he knew a certain prostitute on Grant Street that would satisfy his urges. Not enough time. There was still work to do. With less than an hour left if the story was going to make it to tomorrow's Sunday edition, the one with the largest circulation, he started typing again on his laptop. Leila would have to wait until he finished.

Filled with regret, Travis Cervenak went to the bathroom of the crowded nightclub. It was getting increasingly difficult to say no to Ramon. He knew Ramon was no good for him, but that didn't stop Travis from going to him. The relationship was becoming an obsession. Tonight Ramon went over the line, and Travis was going to break up with him.

Just four years out of law school, his career was progressing quickly at Walsh, Duffy, and Fenster. After starting off as a legal assistant, he passed the California bar exam on his first try. The firm had given him small cases of his own while he helped the partners with legal research. With his impressive success rate and overall knowledge of the law, the partners were now giving him bigger cases.

Although he got along with his colleagues at the firm, he purposely limited any interaction with them socially. As far as they knew, he was just a hard working young lawyer from a small town in Oregon and was involved in a long-term relationship with a pretty young lady named Sharon. He kept a framed picture of her on his desk. The woman in the picture was actually an ex-boyfriend's sister. His story was that they had been going out since high school and attended veterinary school on the East Coast. Some of his co-workers suggested he should date some local women since she was so far away, but he politely declined saying Sharon was the only woman for him.

Travis knew he should just be open about his sexual preference. Hell, this was San Francisco, and times had changed. In the past

decade, attitudes across the country regarding gay marriage had enlightened considerably, but he just couldn't get himself to do it. Everyone who worked at his firm was so proper and straight-laced.

Travis wanted a long-term relationship, but Ramon was his weakness. He was shallow and petty, but Travis couldn't get enough of him. A waiter at a swanky little restaurant on Geary Street, Ramon would never consider hiding his sexuality. He had no long-term aspirations, always living for the moment. Occasionally, he took weeks to return Travis's phone calls. Still, Travis kept coming back to him.

If only he could stick to the promise he made to himself to never see Ramon again.

A few weeks ago, during a late lunch before Ramon's shift at the restaurant, they got into an argument when Ramon insisted that he get his nipples pierced. Travis told him it was not his style and it would hurt too much, but Ramon would not relent. Then Ramon started in with his head-wagging and attitude, yet Travis still called him a couple weeks later to make up.

This was their first outing since that spat at a trendy nightclub on Polk Street. He had arrived earlier at Ramon's apartment, where he was still making himself pretty for the evening. Travis paced his tiny living room and waited for over an hour before he emerged all dolled up.

At the club, Travis said, "Look, I just want to go home."

"Don't be silly. The night just started."

Ramon touched his hand, and Travis pulled away.

He gave him that smile that he always fell for. "Please. I promise to make this an extra special night."

His resistance wavering, he reluctantly gave in.

Travis pulled Ramon aside. "I'll get some drinks. What do you want?"

"You know what I like," Ramon replied. "I'll wait here for you."

The bar was packed. He had to wiggle his way to the front of the line. He held up a twenty and waved it to get any bartender's

attention. After he finally got the drinks, he immediately took large gulps from his peach mojito.

He waded through the mass of people before reaching the area in the dance floor where he last saw Ramon, who was now gone.

The guys they were dancing with told him he left ten minutes ago and was heading to the back of the club.

Travis searched for Ramon, but could not find him, gripped with worry. Knowing Ramon, he probably left to go to another club without letting him know.

He was about to leave the nightclub, when he caught sight of Ramon's platinum blond hair from the corner of his eyes. His heart sunk. Another man's arms were wrapped around him. They were making out right in front of everyone. As if that wasn't bad enough, the other guy was some Harley Davidson biker with black leather pants and a bomber jacket. He had long, brown hair, a thick brown beard, and looked like a Neanderthal.

Part of him wanted to go home and sulk, but another part of him wanted to confront Ramon. Perhaps it was the mojito he drank or the testosterone in the air, but he chose to confront Ramon.

Travis tapped him on the shoulder, and Ramon turned around.

"We're through. I can't believe I even came here tonight with you." Travis walked off.

"Oh, Travis, come on." Ramon did not chase after him. "I can explain. Come on. Just let me explain."

Travis went to the crowded bathroom and held himself up by propping both arms on either side of the sink. He wanted to leave this place and never return. He only had himself to blame. If he were not so weak, he would resist Ramon's offers. Who knew how many other guys Ramon had been with? Travis could count the number of partners he had on one hand. Ramon probably couldn't count his with twenty hands.

As he washed his face in the sink, he bit back tears.

He had to leave. Knowing Ramon was out there with Mr. Harley Davidson made him ill.

He exited the bathroom and walked toward the exit. Ramon and the Harley guy intercepted him. “Come on, Travis, it’s no big deal. How about we just go back to my place and talk about it.”

Travis bit his upper lip. “Leave me alone. I don’t want to ever see you again.” He marched toward the exit.

Ramon pouted as Travis passed him. He was not going to succumb to him ever again. He was pissed off enough to slug the biker, but thought better of it because the guy was as big as an oak tree.

He left the club and breathed in the cool misty night. When he got home he would busy himself with legal briefs to take his mind off this mess. Ramon wasn’t good enough for him anyway. He was a bright, aspiring lawyer, and Ramon had a brain made out of pudding.

He looked for his car and remembered that Ramon came with him tonight. He would need a ride home. For a moment he considered going back in and waiting for him. No, Ramon has to fend for himself tonight.

With all that happened, he forgot where he parked his car. He wandered around the parking lot looking for it. After a few minutes, he found it at the far end of the lot.

His face tightened when he saw how close the adjacent car was to his car. Fortunately, he did not find any scratches.

Just as Travis was about to get into the car, a noise came from a nearby dumpster. His first instinct was to get in his car and drive away, but the noise sounded like an animal in distress. He had a soft spot for animals, owning a Labrador retriever, two cats, and two parakeets.

He walked toward the dumpster. At first he did not see anything, and wondered if he had imagined the noises.

He was about to head back when he saw a long tail that looked as if it belonged to a lizard. Why would somebody bring their pet iguana to the club?

The thing turned toward Travis and stared at him. This was no iguana. This thing was not even possible. Large metallic spikes protruded out from its iguana-like tail. It had a wide, low to the ground body and at least ten small feet. Two large wings sprung from its torso. Its head looked like that of an elephant, with a razor sharp tusk made of ivory.

The thing charged at him. Travis screamed, turned, and ran. The creature lifted its tail high over its head as Travis started running. It released the metallic spikes that were attached to its tail. Eight spikes flew through the air, each connecting with Travis, piercing his body. The spikes struck his head, neck, upper and lower back, thigh, and legs. Travis moaned in agony. He stumbled another twenty feet before collapsing to the ground.

“Come on, Steve, I have to find Travis,” Ramon pleaded with his new biker friend.

Steve rolled his eyes. “Let’s go back inside. Who needs him? He’s just a wet blanket, anyway.”

“I can’t let Travis alone like that. He’s a good guy.”

Steve shrugged. “Suit yourself. I’ll go with you.”

Ramon whistled as they walked out of the club. Travis was over-reacting as usual. No matter. Ramon would cheer up his friend. Life was too short to get angry. As they approached Travis’s car, Steve reached out his hand and Ramon took it. “Oh look. We’re in luck. Travis is still here.”

“I’ll tell you what. I’ll give you a ride on my motorcycle, and we’ll get out of this joint,” Steve said.

“Tempting offer, but we have to find Travis. I can’t leave him angry like that.”

They continued to walk to the car when the big biker stopped. He let go of Ramon’s hand, bent down, and touched something on

the ground. He lifted his hand to the light coming from the parking light. “Holy shit! This is blood.”

Ramon gasped. “Oh my God! I hope Travis didn’t get hurt. You don’t think it’s his blood, do you?”

Steve rose to his feet. “Dunno. There’s a trail going over there.” He pointed to the left of Travis’ car.

As they neared Travis’s car, Ramon started screaming at the sight of the prone body of his lover lying on the ground. A creature came into view and stared at him with intelligent eyes.

“Holy mother of God!” Steve pulled out the .22 Magnum he carried and squeezed the trigger. The creature deftly avoided the bullets with surprising agility for something so low to the ground. Before Steve could fire again, the creature ran full force and rammed his gut with a jagged ivory tusk. Steve sagged to his knees. The creature pulled back and tore into Steve’s throat with its tusk.

Ramon turned and ran. He did not get far before the creature raised its wings to full extension. It flew like a Phoenix, crashing through the air and landing on Ramon’s back, driving him to the ground. Ramon scrambled forward in desperation, but the creature did not let him go far. It raised its spike-filled tail and struck him in the side of Ramon’s head. He wobbled. Before he could move further, it swung its spiked tail and connected with his face, now a crimson mask, his left eye barely hanging from the socket. The creature whipped its tail repeatedly until Ramon’s face was no longer recognizable.

Chapter XXI

Despite his boss's effusive praise for getting a confession from Ray Holman, it was hard for Kevin to feel any jubilation on this Monday morning after having investigated the three bodies found outside of the nightclub in the early hours of the previous morning.

There was no way to hide these killings. There had been too many witnesses. By the time the evening news aired, the story had gone national and viral.

Although these new victims had not been killed in the same manner as the others, they had to be connected. The unnatural way the victims had been murdered within a short period of each other could not be a coincidence. Perhaps multiple assailants working together.

At the station, he picked up the copy of Sunday's San Francisco Chronicle that someone left lying around. He stopped in his tracks when he read the headline.

*Three More Fall Victim to Mysterious Killer
Victims Mutilated in Golden Gate Massacre*

He cringed when he saw the name on the byline of the article. Matt Szatko. How the hell did this son of a bitch get the story so quickly? Kevin had done his best to prevent any information leaks, yet Szatko seemed to know all of the details of the investigation. He would probably scoop the night club murders story as well.

He flipped to page seven. The facts presented in the article were true, although sensationalized. This article was going to do nothing but create panic.

"That bastard," Kevin muttered.

Making people cower in fear was not going to help matters. He wrote this article not as a proclamation of the truth as he claimed, but for his own personal benefit. There was too much at stake for one person to think about their own self-interest.

Kevin reached his office, put his jacket on the hook, and

checked his phone for messages. The only one that interested him was from William Francis, his wildlife expert.

Kevin dialed the number, and Francis picked it up on the first ring. “What do you have for me?”

Francis sighed on the other end. “No good news, unfortunately. The toxic substance found in Danielle Bloch was of unknown origin. First, I used a venom detector kit, which came up negative. Then, I analyzed the venom in my laboratory using more robust testing methods. It still came up negative. It doesn’t match any known snake venom.”

Kevin snapped a pencil he had been holding. “What about the hair follicles?”

“Also of unknown origin. I wish I could give you something more conclusive.”

“Thank you for your efforts, Mr. Francis. I appreciate it.”

“You’re welcome. Reach me if there is anything else I can do to help.”

“Will do.”

This only confirmed what Kevin had been thinking. There was no point in looking for something conventional. He had to change his normal mode of thinking. He had an uncanny ability to get himself into the mindset of the criminal and think like that person. This allowed him to anticipate their next move. That mode of thinking led him to the capture of Ray Holman.

He looked at his watch. It was almost nine. He had so much to do, but did not know where to start. He had to work on a police report for the nightclub killings, but didn’t feel up to the task.

Instead he went looking for Rita. He found her at the water cooler. “Hey.”

Rita looked up. “Why the down face? You’re normally disgustingly cheery in the morning.”

Kevin shrugged. He took a Dixie cup and filled it with water, then followed her to her desk.

“I see you worked some of your magic with Holman,” Rita said.

“I didn’t realize you could be so persuasive. If I knew that, I would have you talk to my landlord.”

“Actually, I told him that if he didn’t sign, I would unleash you on him, and you would rip his heart out and eat it.”

“Yummy. So, how did you manage it?”

“It was strange. I felt like Holman was on the brink of insanity the entire time I spoke with him, walking on a thin ledge and ready to step into the abyss. I felt like a puppet master of sorts, pulling his strings.”

“If he was sitting across from me, I would spit in his face.”

“And that’s why you never get any confessions. The whole time I was there, I just wanted to slug him, so I pretended I was an actor playing a roll.”

“Well, anyway, I think that was pretty damn impressive.”

“This should make it an open and shut case. Were you able to find any murders similar to the ones we’ve had lately?”

“As a matter of fact, I came up with some interesting info.” She reached into her top drawer, pulled out a manila folder and handed it to him.

Kevin pulled up a chair and opened the folder.

“First, I looked up unresolved murders in California over decade. There was a deluge of them. It would take me forever to sift through them all, so I narrowed my search by eliminating any unresolved deaths done by conventional means. I eliminated stabbings, shootings, drug overdoses, hit and runs. This gave me a manageable list. With the remaining list I tried to find anything that could be our perp. I looked for big slash marks, large bites, unknown venom inside the victim, anything that matched the previous killings, keeping in mind that Bloch was killed in a different manner than the three kids at Golden Gate Park. In the end, I came up with fourteen killings over a six year period that could be our guy.”

Kevin looked at her list. They stretched from San Francisco to San Ysidro, right by the Tijuana border. He read the descriptions of the bodies. Torn-off limbs. Decapitations. Jagged slash marks.

Bites. One near Orange County caught his attention. Eight metallic spikes had been hammered deeply into a victim, exactly what happened to Travis Cervanek outside of the nightclub. This had to be the same perp. Sure, the method of death varied in each case, but they were all bizarre and inhuman.

He flipped through the entire stack. When he came to the end he closed the folder. “This is excellent, Rita. I think we have something here. I need to examine the files closely, see if I could pick up something, anything, that can give me a clue as to who is doing this. You don’t mind if I take these with me?”

Rita smiled warmly. “Go right ahead. What I don’t get is the time gap. There were fourteen killings over a six year period, and now we have seven in a week? Something doesn’t smell right.”

“I don’t know,” Kevin replied. “It’s hard to analyze a question like that without having a glimpse of the killer’s mindset. We have to find out what we’re up against.”

Kevin took the folder with him and went to his office, avoiding Captain Bishop’s office. He needed concrete and definitive answers that he could share with his boss. Right now, he had nothing.

He was lucky to count Rita as a colleague and a friend. She was an amazing woman as well as an invaluable resource.

He spread out the sheets of paper on the floor of his office, jotting down dates and locations associated with the killings in addition to the condition of the body. It took him nearly an hour before he found an emerging pattern. He took out a map of the state of California and laid it out near the sheets of paper. There it was a—geographical pattern.

Captain Bishop knocked on his door. “Looks like you have yourself a big mess.”

Kevin nodded as he gathered his papers. He would make photocopies of each of the victims with name, date and location. He would then post it on the wall, which would make it easier for him to study them.

Bishop extended his hand and helped Kevin to his feet. “Good

work on the Holman case. I know you have a lot on your plate. To be honest, I doubted you could handle it. I still think that you would be well-served to take a nice long vacation. You've been under a lot of strain lately. I don't want you to burn out. All the same, you never cease to amaze me. No one else could have gotten that pig to squeal."

"Thanks. I hope you keep that confidence you have in me as I deal with this new mess."

Bishop rubbed his bald head. "It seems that we just walked out of one maelstrom and are climbing into another. People are scared. The politicians are screaming bloody murder. I got a heads up this morning that the FBI is making overtures about this case. Right now, they're still consultants, but this is high profile and they want their sticky fingers all over the case."

Kevin could tackle this killer better than any FBI agent. He had taken several "Inside the Tape" death investigation training courses at the FBI facility in Quantico, Virginia and had met with many of their agents. Although he did not like to be arrogant, he was as good as or better than any of them. He had even been recruited by the FBI in the past year. He began to pace. "Look, I know I can do this. You just need to give me a little time and some slack. I took care of Holman. Use that as leverage with Mayor Bissette and Police Commissioner Simms. I can do this."

Bishop put his hand on Kevin's shoulder. "I have confidence in you. Once they establish that the perp is a serial killer, they'll swoop in on this. I'll do my best to keep them off the case, but I can't promise anything. It's become a huge story thanks to that creep from the Chronicle. So what the hell's going on here, anyway?"

Dreading this moment, Kevin sighed. "There's something seriously out of the ordinary occurring here. No person or animal could have done this. Maybe it's some mutant species that developed from a lab experiment gone awry. Maybe it's an alien species from another world. But I can tell you, it's nothing any of us has ever seen before."

“You’re coming up with aliens and mutant species? And you want me to take this to the mayor in an effort to prevent the FBI from taking over? They’ll think you’re crazy and they’ll think I’m crazy for listening to you. What’s next? Big Foot’s responsible?”

“I’m not ruling out anything at this point.”

Bishop started laughing, but Kevin wasn’t joking.

“Well, I’m going to keep your theories between the two of us and I would advise you to do the same. I don’t want you to lose credibility, and I don’t want to lose mine.” Bishop shook his head. “I’ll think of something to say to them. What a mess! All right, keep me posted.”

“Thanks for not dismissing me as some kind of quack.”

“Who says I haven’t?”

Kevin began posting the papers Rita had given him on the wall. It was time to roll up his sleeves and get to work.

Chapter XXII

Early Tuesday morning, Kevin found himself at the public library on Larkin Street, the largest in the city. He hardly knew where to start. He wanted to know his enemy, but who was his enemy? On an open computer terminal, he searched for books on werewolves, vampires, genetic cloning, lab experimentation on animals, unknown species, voodoo, and the occult.

Although internet research served a purpose, he preferred to do this the old fashioned way. Kevin checked out ten books and began reading, skimming through most of the books. Any time he found something interesting, he made copies. When the work became tiresome, he ventured to a Starbucks a block away.

Yesterday, when he had been studying Rita's files, he noticed a geographical pattern. The first death occurred in June of 2009 in San Ysidro, a Mexican border town. The next one occurred in December of that year in San Diego, followed by another outside of San Diego in February. The San Diego victims had numerous snakebites.

In 2010, the culprit was active, first striking in January, just miles outside of Disney Land, followed by March in Laguna Beach. This victim had been pierced by the same metallic spikes, similar to what he saw with Travis Cervanek outside of the club. In July, there was a killing in Compton, and in November, one near Malibu.

The following year, the killer moved out of the City of Angels. There were three deaths in Bakersfield from June through December. The victims showed no discernable pattern. They were male and female, young and old. They were Caucasian, black, Asian and Latino.

The following January, another killing occurred sixty miles north of Bakersfield. After that, the next one was not until August in Fresno. The perp remained in Fresno for the rest of 2013 and into 2014 with two additional slayings. Those were the last until the most recent ones in San Francisco.

Whoever or whatever caused this carnage was slowly moved its way north. Since the first murder was in San Ysidro, Kevin wondered if the killings actually originated in Mexico, or perhaps Arizona or New Mexico? He was going to extend his investigations to these areas.

At noon, Kevin took a break for a sandwich and a quick workout at his gym, which was within walking distance.

He returned to the library refreshed. After reading for an hour straight, he felt no closer to any meaningful answers. He started closing his books and remembered Wendy's advice about the Stanford University library.

After a stop at the police station, Kevin arrived at Stanford late that afternoon, dreading the idea of looking through more reference books. He sat at a computer terminal at their main library. After finding some interesting titles, he selected two books on werewolves, one on dark tales from Eastern Europe, another on mythical creatures, and one on genetic mutations.

Kevin brought these books to a big table and spread them out. One male student at the end of the table had green hair and glasses. He stared at Kevin, but turned away when Kevin looked at him.

He began reading, trying to uncover something, anything that might help. He was grasping at straws, but what else could he do? There was nobody he could turn to. It was up to him to try to do the impossible.

Manny Marquez felt drained after his physics exam. After leaving the exam room, he got on his bike and began second-guessing his answers. He had barely finished on time, not even able to check his answers.

He made a quick stop at the Student Union to pick up a bottle of water. Inside, a mob of students clustered around a television. Three men had been killed outside of a San Francisco night club. The reporter speculated that they were related to the killings at

Golden Gate Park.

When he arrived at his dorm room, he tried to forget about his exam. Besides physics, he had three other ball-breaking classes this semester, and he had to move on to them. His shift at the cafeteria didn't start until six o'clock, so he had time to kill. Although his brain felt scrambled, he couldn't stand the idea of wasting time.

Manny rode to the library to check the solutions to his Multi-Variate Calculus homework, which were available at the front desk. His classmates told him he was anal. He was just being thorough.

He parked his bike and locked it on a bike rack outside of the library. At the front desk, he asked for the homework solutions for his class. He was in luck when they were available.

He went to the copy room. Of the three copy machines in the room, only one was functioning, and that was being used. He snuck a peek at the materials being copied. It was a book on werewolves. He frowned. Here he was busting his ass studying for a calculus exam and this guy was making copies of some paper he was writing on werewolves. Sometimes life wasn't fair.

The guy made about a dozen copies. When he putting away his copy card, Manny noticed a police badge in his wallet. Why would a cop be making copies at a college library? When the cop left, Manny made his own copies.

When he got back to his table, two pretty young things were studying Spanish. He cringed as they butchered the pronunciations.

One of them said, "*Donde esta mi chaqueta.*" The second girl responded in Spanish that the jacket was on the table.

Although they butchered his language, they were both hot. One was a light skinned black girl with subdued features. She was petite and had a nice laugh. The other was a plump blonde that was nice and curvy.

The two study partners continued for some time with little progress, while Manny struggled through his problems. He always had to work hard at it. Nothing ever came easy to him.

The blonde girl left the table. Manny slid to that end of the

table, and greeted the other one in Spanish. She reciprocated the greeting in Spanish and told him that her name was Yolanda. He tried to speak to her in Spanish, but she could not keep up with him, so he reverted to English.

“So how are we doing with our Spanish?” Yolanda asked.

Manny tilted his hand. “You could use some more practice.”

“I love the way you speak. It just flows so nicely.”

“Well you know Spanish is a Romantic language.”

“I always thought that,” she said. “You got like a whole Bruno Mars thing going. So what’s your major?”

“Mechanical Engineering.”

Yolanda frowned. “You’re in Engineering? Wow. Some guys in my floor are Engineering students, and you’re nothing at all like them.”

“How so?” he asked.

“Well, they’re a little nerdy.”

“The key is to be well rounded. I mean, I could just as easily major in Business, or Biology, or Journalism.”

Manny saw Yolanda’s study partner approach, so he decided to make his move and close the deal. “I would love to take you out some time and show you that engineers know how to have a good time. How about you give me your digits and we’ll get together.”

Yolanda gave him a warm smile. She opened up his calculus textbook and wrote down her name and number. “Now you’re obligated to call or text me, and take me out some time.”

He smiled and closed his book before heading back to his end of the table. Glancing at his watch, it was time to go. As he was putting his textbook into his backpack, he noticed the cop from the photocopy machine carrying a strange assortment of books including some occult stuff, vampire literature, and other macabre subjects.

As he was exiting the library, he realized he left his jacket at the table. He winked at Yolanda and picked up his jacket.

Walking back to the library exit, he glanced at the cop, who was now reading a book on voodoo. Manny stopped in his tracks.

Something clicked in his mind. It was like when he was working on a gut-wrenching engineering problem. He would set up the problem and struggle with it, then all of a sudden, he would find the path-forward needed to solve the problem.

Manny replayed in his mind the news report he heard at the student center about the bizarre murders that had plagued San Francisco. He stared at the cop. Manny had seen him before. He was the detective who had arrested the serial killer.

He thought back about those horrible tales about an insidious creature that terrorized the countryside that his grandfather used to tell him when he was a boy. They were. His mother had dismissed these tales, saying his grandfather was just trying to scare him, but Manny knew better. His grandfather wouldn't make up stories like that. The man never lied. The police had no idea what was committing these recent killings. This cop's research was evidence of that. That was because they didn't know about his grandfather's monster.

Manny sighed. He was pressed for time, but he had to help. This was way more important than school. Still reading the material intently, the cop looked like he hadn't slept in days.

Leaving now would be the coward's way out. His father had always told him to not avoid doing something difficult if it was the right thing to do. "Excuse me, sir."

Kevin sighed in frustration. None of these books had anything about metallic spikes shooting into people, or multitudes of snakebites in conjunction with constriction and jagged slash marks. This was pointless. It was time he started doing real detective work, and not wasting time in the library in a fool's chase. He had to hit the streets and further examine the crime scenes. His culprit existed in the real world, not in the world of legend.

Closing his book, he thought about Wendy. Hopefully she

didn't think he was neglecting her. After he bagged this killer, he would try to take their relationship to the next level. He truly cared about her but was married to this case right now.

"Excuse me, sir."

He looked up and saw a young Hispanic student, the same kid who had been trying to pick up one of the co-eds earlier.

"Yes," Kevin said.

"I hate to break it to you, but you're not going to find what you're looking for by reading those books."

Kevin's brow arched. "Excuse me?"

"You're a police officer. Am I right, sir?"

"Yeah." Kevin was still going through his fifteen minutes of fame. The kid probably recognized him by watching the news.

"And right now you're investigating what happened at the Park, those kids that got mangled and also those people that died at the nightclub. You have no idea how it happened, so you're looking through these books, grasping at straws. You're wasting your time reading these books. They're not going to give you the answers you're looking for."

Kevin folded his arms, amazed at this kid's perception and intrigued at what he had to say, but annoyed that he was trying to tell Kevin how to do his job. "And I suppose you have the answers I'm looking for?"

"No, but I know someone that can help you out."

"Oh yeah?"

"My grandfather. This thing that you're looking for, he knows what it is."

"What am I looking for then?"

"I don't know exactly," the kid said. "But my grandfather has been telling me about it for years."

Kevin looked into his eyes. After years of questioning witnesses, informants and criminals, he could see signs that would indicate if someone was lying. He showed none of these signs. Still, he remained skeptical.

“Hey, man, I can’t make you believe me. But what I’m saying to you is the God’s honest truth. I respect police officers and what you do. I wouldn’t waste your time trying to pedal some bullshit that I’m sure you would sniff out, anyway. Based on what I’ve seen, whatever is doing the killing is the same thing that haunted my grandfather when he was young, that still plagues his nightmares.”

Kevin had no leads, no clues, nothing. What did he have to lose? “Listen, kid, if you’re snowing me and I talk to your grandfather and it turns out you’re telling me a load of crap, I’ll make your life miserable. Do you go to school here?”

“Yeah.” The kid beamed. “I’m an Engineering student.”

“If you’re bullshitting me, I’ll see that you don’t remain one.”

The kid’s smile disappeared. “I’m speaking the truth.”

Kevin lowered his voice. “What’s your name?”

“Manny Marquez.”

“Detective Kevin Russell.” He shook Manny’s hand with a hard grip, causing the kid to wince. “So who is this grandfather of yours?”

“His name is Pedro. He lives in San Diego.”

“Do you live here at school?” Kevin asked.

“Yeah. I’m from San Francisco, so I’m not far from home. I lived with my mother and my brother, Alex. My dad died when I was young.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. Can you give me a phone number so I can contact your grandfather?”

“Actually, you’re in luck,” Manny said. “My grandparents are in town, visiting my mom and brother. I could take you up there to see them.”

“Sure. When are you available?”

“I’m free at four thirty tomorrow, after my Electric Circuit Theory class.”

“Electric Circuit Theory?” Kevin grinned. “Now that sounds like fun.”

Kevin got Manny’s phone number and said he would meet him

in front of the Student Center. He wasn't sure where this was leading, but he was desperate.

Chapter XXIII

Paul woke at five in the morning covered with sweat. It happened again, the same dream that had been terrorizing his sleep for the past week. He held onto the covers and scanned the room, convinced the creature was here. As much as he wanted to forget about what happened, it kept reoccurring night after night in his sleep.

The dreams start out in the same manner. He suffers a flat tire in his car and pulls over to the side of the road. The night is blanketed with fog, and he can barely see anything. He takes out his cell and calls Kevin. After several rings Kevin answers and agrees to come over and help him change his flat tire. He hears a noise. He investigates, but can't see a damn thing. Something's out there. He can feel it. He hears the same noise again. The monster's coming after him.

From this point, the dreams diverge. In one, he drops all pretenses and starts running. He makes it to the road where a truck is coming full speed at him. He swerves and falls to the ground, the truck narrowly missing him. When he looks up, the werewolf is hovering over him. It crushes Paul's face with a massive paw, and digs its claws into him, ripping out his entrails.

In another dream, he runs into the street. The truck is once again coming. This time it slams the brake and comes to a complete stop inches from him. He runs to the door seeking help. The trucker opens the door, but the driver is the werewolf. Paul tries to run, but with uncanny agility it leaps on him and makes him a midnight snack.

A third dream has Kevin arriving on the scene. Paul stares in horror at the werewolf standing directly behind his friend, but Kevin doesn't see it. He screams and tells Kevin to run. Kevin doesn't hear him. Paul continues to shout at him to run, but Kevin doesn't understand. The beast swings its arm and decapitates Kevin.

Paul had always been under the impression that people can't die in their own dreams, but in his nightmares, he always died. When he woke from these dreams, the fear stayed with him and he never bothered going back to sleep. The images were too vivid, too real. Instead, he either sat up in bed or wandered around his house like a zombie. Lately, he tried crossword puzzles to occupy his time.

Physically, he was on the mend. His range of motion of his upper torso was improving, although he still felt stiff. His pain was significantly less. Maybe it was because he was loaded up on Percocet, masking the pain. Since his release from the hospital, he had been popping pills at an alarming rate.

Paul put on a light jacket and went for a walk. He had to clear his mind, still fuzzy from the pain medicine. The sun was just starting to rise in his affluent San Mateo neighborhood. A cloudless sky greeted him. He walked nearly a mile before turning back. Instead of the walk soothing him, he grew jittery. He shied away from trees and nearby bushes. Every car passing by startled him.

This paranoia was bringing him down, affecting his every-day life. What the hell had happened to him? He had always been adventurous prior to the attack. His biggest fear had been sleeping with another man's woman and having that guy find out and put a shotgun to his head while he was naked, something he always skillfully avoided.

Home felt like his sanctuary. He turned on his television and put on CNBC. He had not thought much about his stock portfolio since the attack. His priorities had taken a dramatic shift. Investing in companies used to be fun for him, a game he was skilled at playing.

Fortunately, his parents had been there for him, stopping by to see him every day since he came out of the hospital. His mother was constantly cleaning his house. This was the cleanest it had been since he bought the place. He appreciated them, but they were beginning to be too much. He was injured, not an invalid. They agreed to return to Arizona after he returned to work.

Thanks to his parents, his refrigerator was fully stocked. He looked in the refrigerator and saw a multitude of goodies. He took out a sesame seed bagel and smothered cream cheese on it. At ten o'clock, his phone rang. The calls from work had been coming in more frequently. Even though he told them he needed more time to recover from his injury, it was coming towards the end of the quarter and they needed to close orders.

This call was from Wendy. He had developed a friendship with her, probably because she was hot for Kevin.

“How’s my patient feeling today?” Wendy asked.

“Getting a little better every day,” he replied. “Just a bit sore and stiff.”

“How did the physical therapy go yesterday?”

“I think they went easy on me,” Paul answered. “I’m sure it will get harder. I’m still getting headaches and taking a lot of percs.”

“You should ease up on the pain meds unless you really need it. It’s not always easy to stop taking them if you’ve been overdoing it.”

“Easier said than done. Physically, I’m mending, but I’ve been so jumpy lately. I’m afraid of everything. I’m petrified just going outside. I’ve been having horrible nightmares about the werewolf that attacked me.”

“Have you tried calling one of the psychiatrists I recommended?”

“Not yet, but I will.” Paul hoped he would get better over time, but it was only getting worse. “So how are things going between you and Kevin?”

“Good,” she replied. “We got together over the weekend and had a good time. But I don’t know. He just...”

“What is it?” Paul asked.

“He seems troubled. The first couple of times we got together he was so sweet and attentive, but lately he’s had zero attention span and he’s been irritable. I’m worried he’s losing interest.”

“Not a chance,” Paul said. “The guy’s flat-out crazy about you. It’s this case he’s working on. He’s dealing with something

completely out of the ordinary. If I know Kev, he'll do anything he can to stop it. I've seen him get wrapped up in cases before, but this is different. He won't stop until he sees this thing through, and he might be in over his head. You have to realize, he's super-intense. Always been that way. We would be in football practice in high school, and the coach would have to tell him to ease up because he always went all out all the time. Trust me. It's not you."

"That's comforting to know," Wendy said. "So, has he had any real significant relationships, you know, with other women?"

"Well, he hasn't gone out much over the last few years. He works long hours and gets consumed with his job and all of the bad things he sees. It hadn't been so bad when he had been in Vice before going to Homicide. I think he's reluctant to bring someone into that world. We're complete opposites that way. I prefer casual flings with no strings attached. By the way, if you see that nurse I'm supposed to date on Thursday night, we never had this conversation."

"You're dating a nurse from the hospital?" she asked. "Which one?"

"Never mind. You didn't hear anything from me."

"You can't say that you're going out with one of the nurses and not tell me who it is. Otherwise, I'll just this up on my own."

"All right," he relented. "Coleen. The one with the curly blond hair and the... the healthy physique. She works on the OB/GYN floor."

"You really get around. Okay, I won't say anything. Well, I have to go. Remember to call that psychiatrist I told you about."

"I will."

Wendy felt weary at the end of her shift. At St. Francis, the residents were treated like slave labor. With the brutal hours, lousy pay, and poor working conditions, it made her want to give up when things got really bad. One of the residents she worked with tabulated

the amount that they got paid against the number of hours they worked in a typical week, and computed that they were getting paid below minimum wage. Wendy managed to carry on by visualizing the light at the end of the tunnel.

Despite the fatigue, when Wendy let her head rest on the pillow, all she could think about was Kevin. She truly cared for him, but the way he had been acting of late made her feel helpless.

What if Paul was right, and there was some creature wandering the streets of San Francisco? She shuddered. The story was all over the news, but none of the broadcasts mentioned werewolves or other monsters that lurked in the dark of night. If the people knew the truth, they would be scared witless. If anybody could stop this, it was Kevin. He was fearless and courageous and had confidence in everything he did. She just hoped this case would not damage his psyche beyond repair.

Chapter XXIV

Kevin arrived at the Student Center at 4:45. He texted Manny earlier to make sure they were still on. Stanford's campus was bustling with activity. Scanning the mob of students, he could not find Manny. He had run a background check on the kid earlier. He was the genuine article—no criminal record, a straight A student, active in the community, and on a scholarship at Stanford. His father had been shot and killed in a break in at his store when Manny was a young kid.

Kevin was used to dealing with the criminal element, so it was tough to get used to working with a straight-edge kid like Manny.

He spent most of the morning and early afternoon contacting officers involved in the murders he suspected were related to his current case, putting out calls to police departments in Bakersfield, Fresno, LA, and San Diego, as well as a couple of the smaller police departments. He had little luck. Detectives in San Ysidro and Anaheim had sketchy recollections of the events surrounding these murders, officially ruling out murder because a lack of evidence of human foul play, blaming animals for the attacks.

Kevin was contemplating taking a trip south, stopping at the different precincts so he could speak to the detectives in person, but he was convinced the killer would strike again soon. Dating back to San Ysidro, the victims had been few and far between, yet in the past few weeks, there had been several attacks. He suspected there were more killings that had been concealed better. The killer was getting bolder.

Kevin moved to the front glass doors at the entrance of the building, where there was a constant flow of students, but no sign of Manny.

Kevin put on a pair of shades and took off his jacket.

A hand tapped the back of his right shoulder. “Hey, Detective Russell.” He turned and found Manny wearing a backwards baseball cap.

“I was afraid I wouldn’t find you. This place is a madhouse. How was your Electric Shock Therapy or whatever that class was?” Kevin asked.

“It’s Electric Circuit Theory and it bored me to tears. I’m sure your day was more interesting.”

“It’s been frustrating. I parked a few blocks away from here. Ready to roll?”

Manny nodded. “My grandfather will be in town for a couple more days. He and my grandmother work at a retirement community and they took a few days off to see my brother. I told my grandfather why we were coming. He wants to speak to you.”

As they walked through the campus, Manny greeted a dozen people. When they reached his Pathfinder, Kevin removed his shades and unlocked the doors.

“Nice ride, man,” Manny said. “Is this your own car, or does the city own it?”

Kevin turned on the ignition. “Don’t worry about it. Keep focused on the task at hand.”

“And what’s that?”

“You’re going to help me save some lives,” Kevin answered.

“All right, all right. Man, you need to chill.”

Perhaps the kid was right. He had been wound up tightly of late.

Kevin drove away from campus. “So what do plan on doing after you graduate?”

“I’d like to get a job in the Bay area, maybe with a medical device company. There’s lots of high tech companies here, but I’m keeping my options open, maybe go to grad school.”

Kevin couldn’t help but to be impressed as Manny continued speaking. The kid was bright and personable, and seemed to have his act together. Most kids his age that Kevin dealt with seemed to be drifting aimlessly into an abyss and were so absorbed by their

electronic devices that they were incapable of having a real conversation.

A half-hour later they were at Manny's house.

Manny stretched after exiting the car. "It's good to be home. I miss this place. When I first started at Stanford, I didn't think I would. Maybe my family and friends, but not this place. Growing up here built character in me."

Kevin smiled. "You seem pretty grounded. Hard work will always allow you to rise to the top. If you bust your ass, you'll wind up doing okay for yourself. Let's get going."

"All right. Follow me."

The houses on the block were cramped, but well-maintained, showing that the residents had pride in the appearance of their neighborhood.

After entering the house, an older woman Kevin guessed was the kid's grandmother walked quickly across the room. "Manuel." He hugged her and gave her a kiss on the cheek. Likewise he greeted the old man.

"This is Detective Kevin Russell of the SFPD. This is my grandfather and my grandmother."

"It's good to meet you." Pedro Marquez shook his hand. "Manuel told me about your case. We sit down and talk." They moved to the kitchen, with the exception of Manny's grandmother, who excused herself. "I read newspaper and I'm afraid we have big problems." He put a copy of the San Francisco Chronicle that had the story of the three young men killed at Golden Gate Park on the kitchen table.

So far, Kevin wasn't having problems understanding Pedro's broken English. "Although sensationalized, that is an accurate report of what occurred." It still steamed him that the reporter got this information and put it in his story.

Pedro sat back and sighed. "Then we in big trouble." He left the table and poured himself a cup of coffee. Kevin and Manny both declined his offer of coffee. "This is the work of Conjesero."

“Conje...what?” Kevin asked.

“Conjesero. My people have been familiar with Conjesero for long, long time and now he comes north into this country. Conjesero is pure evil. And now he’s here.”

“Back up, Mr. Marquez.” Kevin had no idea what this old man was talking about, and it had nothing to do with their language barrier.

“Detective Russell,” Pedro said, “What I am going to tell you, you might have hard time to understand. But I try my best.” He spoke slowly. “Conjesero can walk among people for he is man, but he’s much more than that. Conjesero is shape changer. He can look like man one day, then be something different, something really, really bad.”

“Tell him everything from the beginning,” Manny said. “Tell him all you know.”

“Okay.” Pedro sipped his steaming hot coffee. “Detective, I start from the beginning Conjesero was Voudon priest who live in Mexico. I don’t know how old he was, but the old people say he was back in times of Alamo. But who knows? He practice Voudon art, but could not find power he needed in Mexico. He went to Haiti and Dominican Republic where Voudon was strong, still is strong, and he learn and become powerful. He studied Voudon and became more powerful than all other priests and shamans. They fear him. He became stronger; he became cruel. He kill and torture to gain fear and respect. The local law tried to stop him, but they could do nothing. Their family would be found dead, ripped apart.” He made a tearing motion with his two hands. “They knew if he get stronger, they could do nothing to stop him. So all Voudon priests gathered and made pact with law people to get rid of him. They thought they kill him, but he still live. Now he here.”

Kevin rubbed his temples, the onset of a headache rapidly approaching. “So the person behind these killings is a shape-changing voodoo priest who’s been alive for like a couple hundred years or so.” He glanced at Manny. “This is crazy.”

Manny raised an eyebrow. “I saw the books you were reading at the library. Don’t tell me you haven’t already been considering something that goes far beyond the boundaries of what’s considered normal.”

“Good point.”

Pedro wiped his brow with a handkerchief. “I know it’s hard to believe. I wouldn’t believe either, but I saw with my own eyes. Let me tell you story, Detective.”

Pedro yanked the rope tied to the goat. “Come on. We don’t have all day. Mama’s gonna be mad if I don’t get home before dark.”

The goat did not seem to care about Pedro’s pleas. It stubbornly moved at a crawl. Cursing, Pedro pushed the animal along.

The past crop season was a rough one. He and his family barely scraped by, which was why he was selling the goat. It was a shame. He enjoyed this animal’s company.

Perhaps the goat knew Pedro was going to sell him or perhaps it was just being stubborn. Regardless, they would be here all night if they did not pick up their pace, and his chores at the farm would not get done by themselves. Once more he cursed the goat.

An anguished scream startled Pedro. He looked around, trying to find its source. The scream came again, causing the hair on the back of his neck to rise. What in the name of God could cause a person to scream like that?

With haste, he tied the goat to a tree and ran as fast as he could in the direction of the scream. He never carried a weapon, since there was little crime in his farm or the nearby villages. Now he regretted that decision.

His eyes went wide at the sight of a mother and baby. The mother was smoldering in a shroud of flame. Fortunately, she dropped the baby, who had not caught on fire. Pedro stood indecisively. There was nothing he could do to save the mother even

if there was a nearby lake he could throw her into. It was too late for her.

He looked around. Nothing else was on fire. What could have caused this poor woman to be set ablaze like this?

A loud rattling sound emerged from the grass. Something slithered toward him. His first thought was that it was a serpent, which made no sense since a serpent couldn't be out in a dry place like this, but there was no way a snake could be that big.

Pedro gasped. The serpent had the head of a lion. Impossible, but Pedro saw it with his own eyes. The lion head roared and breathed fire, scorching the grass around it. Pedro's heart thundered in his chest. Sweat dripped from his brow. The creature slithered toward the baby.

"No!" Pedro did not know what he could do against this beast but did not think long about it. He found a large rock nearby. He ran, picked up the rock, and raced toward the infernal serpent. He lifted the rock and smashed the lion head. Gasping for breath, he lifted the rock overhead, and once more brought it down onto the lion head. He repeated this several times, before tossing the rock aside.

He had not killed the beast, for it still breathed. However, it was motionless. Not waiting around to find out if it was still alive, he lifted the crying baby into his arms. He glanced at the mother, but she had long since stopped moving, and continued to burn in a heap. He ran with the baby to the town where he originally intended on selling the goat.

Pedro reached the constable's office and told them his story. He could only imagine what he sounded like. He had to be raving like a madman, yet they seemed to believe him.

The constable wore a deep frown and closed his eyes. "That was Conjesero. Can't be no other. Sorry. We can't help you. You try to stop Conjesero and you wind up dead."

"We have to do something about that monster," Pedro pleaded.

The constable sadly shook his head.

Pedro tried to plead his case to the deputies, but they were not willing to help either. The only assistance they gave him was to escort him to the baby's father. The father was grateful to Pedro for returning his child, but was unwilling to confront the beast, even though it had killed his wife.

Demoralized, Pedro left town. On the way out, he encountered a man so old he looked to have lived a century. The man told him all he knew about Conjesero, how he was a Voudon shaman of extraordinary power who had created terror for decades. "You have to understand the law men around here live in fear of Conjesero. He's a nightmare used to scare children, but he's very real. I would help you, but I am too old and not strong enough."

Pedro thanked the old man and continued home. Dusk was settling. He went back to the place where the beast killed that woman, and where he left his goat. When he arrived, the goat was charred to a crisp. All that was left was her burnt remains. Pedro sank to his knees and sobbed.

Pedro Marquez wiped tears from his eyes. "I go home that night and try to forget everything. I never saw him again, but I knew he be back. Well he back now, and we all in trouble."

Kevin stared at the old man in amazement. He thought himself to be a good judge of character, and for the life of him, he did not think Pedro was lying. All the same, the story was outrageous. It would take a leap of faith to believe him, no matter how sincere Pedro seemed. Then again, nothing in this case made a damn bit of sense.

Pedro wiped his brow with a handkerchief. "Knowing they could do nothing, law people in Mexico stopped trying. They met with man Conjesero who was called Juan Miguel Diaz. They tell him if he limit what he do and spread death around to different places, then they no try to stop him. He turn into winged creature and killed

one of them. Nobody stop Conjesero. So he go on and do his evil, moving from place to place.”

Kevin studied Pedro Marquez and found the same integrity and honesty in the man’s face that he noticed in his grandson. A week ago, he would have blown off these claims, but now, the facts were too overwhelming for him to ignore them. “That’s a remarkable story, Mr. Marquez.” It also fit the puzzle. The files Rita had given to him showed a geographical pattern to these killings, starting in San Ysidro, a Mexican border town, and progressing north. He was willing to bet that if he went to Mexico, he would uncover more killings that fit this pattern.

“Yeah, that’s amazing.” Manny appeared riveted the whole time his grandfather spoke.

“There’s more,” Pedro said. “A well-known gangster named Carlos Guerreuro in Tijuana use Conjesero for his own gain. He use Conjesero to kill people and make him money.”

“Now we know what we’re dealing with here,” Manny said. “So, what do we do about it?”

“What do we do about it? Listen, Manny, I appreciate your help as well as yours, Mr. Marquez, but this is the most dangerous killer I’ve ever seen. You’re a student. You have no idea what the hell it’s like to deal with a serial killer. I’ve been in homicide for eight years and I don’t know if I can handle this perp. If you try, he’ll kill you. I won’t let that happen.”

“Look, I know the city,” Manny said. “I can get into places you can’t. I can see people you can’t. You’re too famous. Hell, I recognized you and I barely watch the news. People won’t talk to you. I can be your eyes and ears.”

Pedro’s face became stern. “What Detective Russell say is true. This is no game. Very dangerous. Believe me. I know.”

Manny folded his arms.

“Look, the information you gave me may prove to be valuable, and it’s possible that you guys could help me out again. Let me

contact you if I need help. Otherwise, go back to your normal lives. I'm going to hunt down this son of a bitch."

A woman and a boy Kevin presumed were Manny's mother and brother walked through the front door. The woman eyed Kevin warily.

"Hi, Mrs. Marquez." Kevin rose from his chair and offered his hand. "I'm Detective Kevin Russell from the San Francisco Police Department. Manuel and his grandfather were helping me out with a case I'm investigating."

She still had a look of apprehension.

"There's no need to worry. They are just giving me information that might help."

"Oh. Okay," she said.

Behind her, the boy hid.

Trying to break the ice, Kevin said, "You must be Alex. Your brother told me a lot of nice things about you."

Manny nodded toward his brother. "He's all right, Alex."

Slowly, he moved from behind his mother toward him. Kevin crouched so that he was eye level with Alex. Judging by the cold reception, Kevin figured he didn't have the highest opinion of cops. He extended his hand.

Alex hesitated before shaking Kevin's hand. "Hi," he mumbled.

"It's good to meet you," Kevin said. "Manny and your grandfather were just helping me out." He stood and turned towards the boy's mother. "They can fill you in on it, but I ask that you don't pass the information to anyone else. It's confidential."

Rosa Marquez nodded. "I understand."

Kevin smiled. "You should be proud of your sons. Manny is a brave and smart young man. I'm sure his father would be happy to see how he turned out."

Rosa beamed. "I am very proud of both of my sons."

Kevin gave Manny and Pedro his business cards. "If anything comes up that you think I should know about, give me a call."

Kevin shook hands with everybody before he was about to take Manny back to his campus.

Rosa folded her arms. “You two just got here. I’ll make dinner for everyone.”

“I can’t, Ma,” Manny said. “My shift at the cafeteria starts in an hour. We have to get going.”

“I’d love to stay,” Kevin said. “But I have too much work to do.”

Rosa sighed. “The next time you come to my house, you stay for dinner, Detective Russell.”

“I would enjoy that.”

On the ride back, Manny asked a barrage of questions about the case, most of which he couldn’t answer. When they reached Stanford, he said, “Let me help you out.”

Kevin shook his head and stared at Manny. “No way, kid. You have a promising future. I’m not going to have you ruin it by getting yourself killed.”

Chapter XXV

Over the last few days, Matt had been living his dream. No longer a lowly stringer for the Chronicle, Matt had skyrocketed to fame by being a beacon of truth.

He just finished a spot for CNN and was scheduled for Dateline. As the reporter who broke the story of the killer that had mutilated seven people in the Bay Area, he was in demand. Yesterday, Fox News, 20/20, and the BBC had interviewed him.

The story had gone international as shock over the grisly violence spread. It only escalated after he obtained police photos of three men killed outside of a gay nightclub in San Francisco.

Matt only owned one suit, so he had to mix up his wardrobe for his television appearances. He wished he had time to buy another suit, but he was not about to turn down a single interview. This was his ticket to fame. Nobody would forget the name Matt Szatko.

Matt went into his bedroom closet inside his tiny, roach-infested apartment looking for another tie. He couldn't find anything suitable.

He picked out a red tie with yellow polka dots. He must have been smoking pot when he bought this one. The other ties in his closet were equally dreadful.

He glanced at his watch. He didn't have time to shower since he had to be in the studio in less than an hour. This was live, national television, and he was the star of the show.

Matt changed his sweat-soaked shirt. He grabbed a Milky Way bar stashed in the drawer next to his bed. No matter how much junk food he ate, he never put weight on his scrawny frame. He began to come up with grandiose plans including getting a personal trainer since he was about to become a big star.

The man sat on a chair in the boiler room with today's addition

of the San Francisco Chronicle. He chuckled as he read the story. Every day there had been a different story on the mysterious killer that plagued the Bay area. Amazingly, some of the information was correct.

The media paid too much attention to these events. Far too much for his liking. The man read over the articles once more. There were four in today's paper. He barely watched the television news, so he was not aware whether or not this story had become national news. Mostly, he fixated on Matt Szatko's articles.

He smiled. This game was getting a little more interesting.

So, you think you're a smart guy. A little too smart for your own good. It was not healthy for aspiring reporters to be overly ambitious. Sometimes these people got hurt. Perhaps it was time to send a message that it was not a good idea to get too close to the truth.

Before then there was work to do. He had a busy day at his job.

He got his equipment together. The man enjoyed his current job. It gave him autonomy and occupied his time. It allowed him to stay invisible. Nobody ever noticed him, which was the way he enjoyed it. He'd had enough of living the high-octane life of a gangster and preferred complete obscurity.

He picked up the newspaper and read the lead story. It was time to pay his new friend a visit. So, Matt Szatko wanted to be a star. Well, he would make him a star.

Chapter XXVI

Kevin opened the door of his townhouse and welcomed Wendy with a hug and a long, lingering kiss.

“Do you greet all of your visitors like this?” she asked.

He held Wendy in his arms. “Only the beautiful ones.”

She kissed him gently on the lips. “And how many of those do you get?”

“Let me think about.” After a moment’s hesitation, he said, “Only you.”

“Good answer.” Wendy patted him on the head. “You’ll be easy to train.”

“Come on in. How was your day?”

“Busy, busy, busy. I’ve been swamped at the hospital.” Wendy yawned. “I hope I can stay awake.”

“My mere presence should be enough to keep you up.” He led her to his sofa and put his arm around her.

“How was your day?” Wendy asked.

Kevin sighed. “I’ve had better. I was just following empty leads and dead ends all day.”

“I read an article in the paper this morning. The writer savaged the police department for the way they’ve handled the case. According to this reporter, nothing’s being done to figure out who’s behind the murders. I got so angry reading it. He took personal shots at you. What the hell? A week ago you were the hero for arresting the Hail Mary Rapist. Now you’re some incompetent fool.”

“If you met this reporter, you would know why. He’s pond scum. People are scared. My boss told me today that restaurant traffic is down thirty eight percent in the past week. Hotel reservations have been hit even worse. Shopping malls, beauty salons, and especially bars and nightclub traffic are taking a beating.”

Kevin promised himself he wouldn’t think about Conjesero tonight. Since he had met Pedro Marquez yesterday that was all that

he could think about. Tonight, he wanted to drown his thoughts in this pretty woman.

Wendy massaged his shoulders. “You’re all tense. I know some manipulation techniques I want to try on you.”

“Please manipulate away.” Kevin took a deep breath. “I tried contacting some of the officers involved in the killings I think are related to this case. Either I couldn’t get a hold of them, or they weren’t willing to say anything useful.”

Kevin never talked about his cases to any of his other girlfriends, but he felt a unique bond with Wendy. He surprised himself yesterday when he had told her about his conversation with Pedro Marquez.

“You said that the old man told you that this Conjesero was a man. I’m still having a hard time believing this, but for argument’s sake, if he is a man, that would make him some sort of shape-shifter.”

Kevin closed his eyes. Whatever Wendy was doing was working, because he was already feeling relaxed. If she kept this up, he might be the one falling asleep. “If what Pedro said is true, then yes. Not only that, he must have a vivid imagination after seeing how different these killings have been.”

Wendy pulled back. “Do you really believe this? It sounds crazy.”

“At this point, I know that something far from normal is happening. I don’t want to have any preconceived notions that might prevent me from capturing the killer or killers. The more I think it through, the more I find myself buying his story. The evidence supports this theory. The possibility of a mutant creature is highly unlikely since there would have to be many different kinds of these mutants, and how could they possibly exist without people finding out about them? These mutants couldn’t have lived in anonymity during the past six years in major metropolitan areas.

“His story is consistent with what I’ve seen at the crime scenes. There is a trail of similar killings starting near the Mexican border

about six years ago before migrating north, which points to the murders starting in Mexico as Pedro suggested. If this Conjesero could become a person and blend in with the rest of society, then nobody would have a reason to suspect him. If you had a creature like the Yeti, for instance, in a major city, there would be all kinds of sightings. The bottom line is that I have no better alternative. At least I can put an identity to these killings. Before I was grasping at straws.”

“How are you going to catch this guy?” she asked.

“Wish I knew. If the case is turned over to the FBI, how am I going to explain Conjesero to them? Even if I could, they would never believe me. I have to find this bastard. I just don’t know how.

“Today, I drove over to Danielle Bloch’s house in Russian Hill and canvassed the neighborhood, going door to door and asking the neighbors if they had seen somebody on the day of the murder that seemed suspicious. Nobody had seen anyone they thought was peculiar or out of place. I got a couple of vague and sketchy descriptions of people: a heavysset biker wearing a blue bandana, a kid riding a skateboard and doing dangerous stunts off the sidewalk, and a middle-aged man with a goatee wearing a suit. In this long day of futility, the only thing that kept me going was that I was going to see you tonight.”

Wendy turned him around and kissed him lightly on the lips.

“Let’s change the subject. I could ravish you right here and now, or we could get something to eat.”

“Hmm,” Wendy said. “Food or sex? I’ll take food.”

Kevin laughed. “That’s not right. You’re hurting my fragile male ego.”

“I haven’t gone food shopping lately, so I’m afraid my cupboards are a bit bare, but I know this great Chinese takeout place nearby.”

After getting into Kevin’s Pathfinder, Wendy said, “I talked to Paul yesterday morning. I’m starting to worry about him.”

Kevin frowned. “Oh yeah. Why so?”

“He was talking about how jumpy he’s been lately. He’s afraid to leave his house.”

“That doesn’t sound like him at all. He’s never been afraid of anything. One time he was at a bar and started a fight with this guy that had about five inches and a hundred pounds on him, but Paul didn’t care. Luckily for him I diffused the situation before he got pounded.” He hesitated. “He doesn’t scare easily.”

“He also never had a near death experience prior to this. Call him. I know you’ve been busy with the case, but maybe you can hang out with him one night. Go out somewhere. He would feel safe around you. I know I do.”

Kevin nodded. “I’ll call him a call tomorrow.”

They pulled up to the entrance of the House of Wang. When they returned to Kevin’s old Victorian house they feasted on General Tso’s chicken, orange beef, a pint of Wonton soup, an egg roll, a spring roll, and four fortune cookies.

After dinner, Kevin looked at Wendy longingly. A pang of guilt crept up on him. If Conjesero was half as dangerous and intelligent as Pedro Marquez made him out to be, then he might target Wendy. In Pedro’s accounting of the tale, when the Mexican authorities had confronted Conjesero, he killed one of them. By hunting Conjesero, he was putting himself in danger. He could take care of himself, but what if Conjesero targeted Wendy to get to him?

He tried not to worry about it. He was in far too deep to back out now.

He and Wendy spent the rest of the evening cradled in each other’s arms watching trashy reality television. He wished he could bottle up his feelings so that it could last forever, because he knew in his bones that he was riding a storm that was about to get out of control.

Chapter XXVII

“How would you characterize the deaths that have occurred over the past couple of weeks in San Francisco?” Stone Phillips asked.

Matt paused to appear thoughtful. “Stone, we’re just scratching the surface here. Having seen the police reports and personally viewing the body of Danielle Bloch, I can tell you that something inhuman was responsible. What occurred here is downright frightening. We have something on our hands that we have never seen before, and the police seem incapable of dealing with it.”

“You have determined in your own investigation that this was not done by a person. So what is responsible?” Stone asked in a steady voice.

“The SFPD has been slow to comment. This smells like a cover up. What I demand to know is what aren’t they telling us? They’re either intentionally deceiving us or they’re incompetent. This area is a technology hotbed, and I think one of these huge, well-funded companies crossed the boundaries of nature, and now we’re paying the price for it.” Matt had worked up a sweat. He had the audience reeling. Even though no one was actually in front of him, he could sense it. He had been working on this theory and even though he didn’t have the facts to substantiate it just yet, he was sure there was something to it.

“Why do you suspect a cover up?” Stone asked.

The production manager at the satellite studio signaled they were nearing the end of the segment. He had to dazzle the audience.

“Stone, there are billions and billions of dollars at stake here in Silicon Valley. These companies have sprouted from backyard operations with niche software packages to multi-billion dollar corporations with political and economic power. The Ciscos and Microsofts of the world are huge business. If it got uncovered that they created this disaster, the ramifications to these companies would be devastating.”

“Thank you for your time and your excellent investigative work, Mr. Szatko,” Stone said across the satellite feed. The signal broke and the segment was over.

Matt had a wide smile as he left the studio. He could hardly wait to watch the program later. The producer had told him his segment was dynamite. He hoped his grandmother was watching in her nursing home. She was the one person in his life who always believed in him. He felt guilty for not visiting her this past week as he always did, but this had to make her proud.

He retrieved his crappy Chevy Monte Carlo from valet parking. He needed to upgrade his car, but never had the money. That would change. Soon, he would have speaking engagements, a book deal, and more income from his newspaper.

As he tipped the driver for his car, he came to the realization that he was going to have to be more conscious of the way he acted in public. Normally, he freely dropped insults and could be downright nasty to people who slighted him. He would have to make an effort to be nice to people, something that didn’t come natural to him.

Although anxious to get home, he felt a hunger pang. He had hardly eaten anything all day. He stopped at a Greek pizza place and ordered a large pepperoni and anchovy pizza. As he waited, two customers spoke about the theory he had floated about these killings being the result of some high tech company snafu. He smiled. It was already gaining traction, and perception was reality.

Matt looked at his watch. He still had an hour until his Dateline segment. That would give him enough time to watch his CNN spot and the local television appearances he made over the past couple of days. He would watch them repeatedly, studying them, seeing where he scored points and where he struggled, in order to perfect his interviewing skills.

He pulled into an alley that led to his cramped parking space behind his apartment building. He parked the car, retrieved his pizza, and entered his apartment complex. Maybe after Dateline he could

call some women he knew that ordinarily wouldn't give him the time of day. Things would be different now that he was famous.

On his way to his apartment, he did not see anybody. Despite living in the building for a year and a half, he barely knew any of the other tenants. Sometimes he felt as if he was invisible.

He frowned when he found his door unlocked. He always locked the door. Things had been so hectic lately, he must have forgotten.

He scanned his refrigerator and found a can of Busch. He opened the beer, then searched his drawers for packets of salt and pepper.

He walked to his makeshift kitchen table with his plate, beverage, and condiments. He bit into the slice of pizza before putting on a spot he did for a local news program he recorded on his DVR.

Matt jumped, his pizza flying through the air as a harsh raking sound came from the carpet behind him. He screamed, his eyes wide, as something slithered across the floor. What the hell is that? Impossible. At first, he thought it was an overgrown iguana, until he looked at its head, which had the appearance of an unworldly lion. Two snake-like appendages came from its sides. They were thick and nasty like a boa constrictor, bearing sharp fangs and hissing at him. Its lion head roared as deep tendrils of smoke came from its mouth. The body was low to the ground and it moved with incredible agility using its padded feet.

“Holy shit!” How could something like this even exist?

Its claws tore holes into his carpet. Smoke filtered out of its mouth. The snakes crisscrossed to opposite sides of the room. He wanted to scream, but was incapable.

Have to get out of here. He scrambled out of his chair, forgetting about the pizza and his television appearances. He flipped over the table as the lizard thing lunged at him. He shot past it toward his front door, darting as fast as he could. He thought he made it, until its tail flared across the floor in a sweeping motion. A

jolt of intense pain shivered up his body as it whipped the back of his calves. He yelped as his feet lifted off the floor and he crashed onto his back.

He tried to pull himself up and knocked over a lamp. It slid off the table and fell on top of him, cutting his left cheek. Throwing the lamp aside, he rolled over on all fours, operating on survival instincts he didn't know he possessed.

He stood despite the pain radiating from the back of his legs and made a blind dash to the door, hoping against hope that he would reach it before this beast finished him. Before he got there, the lion head shot a burst of flame across the room. The searing heat ripped across his back, as his hair and clothes caught fire. He hit the floor and thrashed like a maniac as the beast slithered forward. It pounced on him, sinking its fangs deep into his side. Just like that, all his hopes, dreams, and aspirations of fame and fortune were gone. Before he perished he had to smile at the irony that the very thing that was going to make him famous would do so through his death.

Chapter XXVIII

Rita stared at Kevin with heavily knitted brows after he relayed to her in low tones outside the cafeteria Pedro Marquez's story.

Rita folded her arms. "You feeling all right?"

Kevin frowned. "Yeah, I'm fine."

"Kevin, um, you might be losing your grip on reality with the pressure your under."

"You think I actually want to believe his story? I've looked at the evidence a thousand different ways, and his story fits. It fits our timeline. It fits the geographical pattern. It fits the method of death."

After arguing for fifteen minutes, she finally started to bend.

Rita sighed. "You've always been pragmatic, but this Conjesero sounds like the boogeyman. So what do you plan on doing?"

"I plan on hunting this thing down. I have no choice. If this is true, Conjesero is a person, albeit one with a demented mind and unimaginable power. I'll figure out where he'll strike and capture him." The words sounded easy coming out of his mouth, but he knew it would be far from easy.

"Assuming all this is true—and that's a big assumption—if you capture him, what's to say he won't just change into something and escape? He can become a bird and fly away."

Kevin had no answer for that.

She shook her head. "This is crazy. You won't be able to take down something like that by yourself. This would take an entire SWAT team, maybe even an army. You can't do this on your own." Her voice started rising.

They took the conversation to his office, where he closed the door behind them. "What alternative do I have? If I go around telling people this story, they'll think I've gone Fruit Loops. I'm risking your trust by telling you."

"Let's go to Bishop," Rita said. "Tell him everything you told

me and that you need serious backup. He'll give you whatever you need."

Kevin shook his head. "He'll take me off the case if I tell him some voodoo priest can morph himself into whatever he damn well feels like and is going around killing people. Don't you see? I have to do this on my own."

"I feel like shaking some sense into you. This is madness. Look, let's go to Bishop and present this as a hypothetical and see..."

Before she had a chance to finish what she was saying, inside his office, the phone rang. "Let me get this."

He answered the phone. His heart sunk when he found out that there was another victim that fit the same pattern of murders—reporter Matt Szatko. After hanging up the phone, he sat at his desk with his forehead leaning on his palm.

"I'm coming to the murder scene with you," Rita said.

They took Kevin's car and went to the rundown apartment. As they approached the apartment, he smelled the stench of charred flesh.

They walked into the apartment where a half-dozen officers and examiners milled about. They examined the burnt remains.

Rita gasped when she saw the body. Kevin remained stone-faced.

The corpse's skin was torn on the back, neck, and chest. It looked like they had been ripped by sharp fangs. Szatko's abdomen had been shredded from bites. The remaining skin on his body was blackened and shriveled. The skin on his head had been burnt completely, revealing his exposed skull.

The lower portion of the torso had only been scorched slightly. There were horrible welts on the back of his calves.

Kevin sighed. He and Rita continued the investigation, collecting hair follicles and skin that had been left behind. He classified these as evidence, even though he knew they would never see a court of law.

While he gathered samples, Rita questioned the officers who

initially arrived at the scene. Several tenants had called the building superintendent after smelling smoke. They thought something in Matt's apartment had caught fire. The superintendent knocked on Szatko's door, but there was no answer, so he let himself, and discovered Szatko's nearly cremated body.

After finishing their investigation, Kevin and Rita left. Once inside his car, he asked, "So what do you think?"

"What, about your Mexican voodoo guy? It still sounds crazy, but I don't know what else could have killed someone like that. There were no signs of breaking and entering. And a person couldn't do all that, with the burning and bite marks. A person could have lit Szatko on fire, but those bite marks, they looked like they're from a wild animal."

"It's Conjesero," Kevin slammed his fist on the steering wheel. "It has to be."

When they got back, Kevin decided not to take Rita's advice and tell his theories to Lieutenant Bishop. Instead, he schemed ways to capture the killer. He had to set a trap. The problem was Conjesero could attack any time he wanted, and then just blend in with the crowd.

He had to interview practitioners of voodoo and the black arts in the Bay Area. Perhaps there was a network of these people, and they would know Conjesero's identity. He spent the remainder of the afternoon working the phone trying to find good contacts.

Nearly an hour after they arrived at the Sports Depot, Paul seemed to finally unwind. Unfortunately, Kevin couldn't. Not after Conjesero had struck again.

Paul became talkative after his third Corona, even managing to coax Kevin into talking about Matt Szatko. Prior to this, it appeared that Conjesero had been attacking random people. Matt Szatko was obviously a targeted killing.

"But why take out the reporter?" Paul asked.

“As much of an asshole as he was, he was a damn good reporter. Maybe he thought Szatko was getting close to uncovering him. He had been right on top of this story from the jump. Or maybe he wanted to send a message to anyone trying to uncover his identity.”

Paul gulped his beer. “That’s a tough way to go.”

“I feel guilty,” Kevin said. “Don’t get me wrong, this guy was a creep and I couldn’t stand him. Just before the killings started, he followed me around like a vulture. I just about throttled him once. All the same, nobody should die like this.”

Behind Paul on a large screen, Hunter Pence hit a mammoth home run that landed in McCovey Cove sending the patrons at the Sports Depot into a frenzy. “Nice shot.” He turned to Kevin. “You had no idea this guy was going to be killed. There’s no sense in blaming yourself. If you could have prevented it, then that would be a different story. But how could you know that one of his readers wouldn’t like what he was writing?”

“So, how exactly can a monster read a newspaper?”

Kevin shrugged.

“Why won’t you answer my question?”

“Because you don’t need to know,” Kevin replied.

Paul scowled, his voice rising. “What do you mean? I was almost killed by this werewolf. That entitles me to some answers.”

Kevin signaled a waitress. “No it doesn’t. Worry about getting healthy and getting on with your life. Leave the cop stuff up to the detective. I don’t tell you how to market your microchips.”

“Come on, man. For my piece of mind, I gotta know.”

The waitress came over, and he ordered another Corona for Paul. It was the perfect opportunity to change the subject. “So how have you been holding up?”

Paul shrugged. “I’ve had better days. I guess I’ve had worse also.”

“How’s the pain?” Kevin asked.

“It’s not so bad now. I only took a couple of Percocets today.”

“So what’s bothering you?”

Paul looked beyond Kevin to one of the large television screens. “I don’t know. I can barely leave the house anymore. I’m always looking over my shoulder.”

“You’re out tonight. Everything seems to be alright.”

Paul chuckled. “Yeah, but I’m out with you, and you’re packing heat.”

“Listen, what attacked you before won’t do it again. What happened was an isolated incident. You were in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

“It all seems so logical when you say it, but I don’t feel that way. I’m scared.” The waitress brought Paul’s Corona.

“You have to start living your life again.” Kevin said. “I’m not talking about acting like nothing ever happened. It won’t be that easy. But slowly you should start doing some of the things that you used to do. You know, date women, go to ball games, go deep-sea fishing. You can’t live your life afraid.”

“So what’s the answer?”

“You stared death in the face, and death gave you its best shot, but you’re still standing. You were given a new lease on life. Perhaps you did things you regretted in the past. Take this opportunity to right some wrongs.”

Paul smiled. “Well, this has been a good time. Maybe, I’ll start going out more often. Just around the neighborhood at first, but it’s a start.”

Kevin tried to give it his best spin to make Paul feel better, but after what had happened to Matt Szatko, Kevin had a terrible foreboding that nobody close to him was safe.

Chapter XXIX

Since the near knife fight between Saleen and Terron, Alex Marquez had felt nothing but dread. The janitor interrupting the fight only delayed the violence. Like a tidal wave descending on a beach, this could only end in disaster.

Alex had been doing his best to steer clear of his friends since he made his promise to Manny. In school, he couldn't stay focused. In science class, Mrs. Strout called on him to answer a question about the planet Venus. When he didn't know what she was talking about, she made a comment that his mind was in Venus, getting a laugh out of his classmates.

After school was over, he bolted home before anybody could catch up to him. When the other kids came knocking for him, he always had a chore to do, or somewhere to go with his grandparents.

He enjoyed having his grandparents around. Since they arrived, Grandpa Pedro took him out three times for ice cream. His Grandpa knew something was up. He kept asking Alex questions. Eventually he told Grandpa about his problems, skipping the part about the knife fight.

Grandpa Pedro put his arm around Alex's shoulder while they were eating ice cream. "You remind me a lot of your father. He always find trouble when he was your age. Always being tougher than other kids. Never turned down no fight, him. I take him to a gym in Guadalajara and teach him how to box. After that, he no fight in the street no more. He fight in the ring. Your father was a good boxer. Maybe if it's okay with your Momma, I take you to the gym."

"That would be sweet, Grandpa."

Grandpa Pedro tapped his finger on Alex's head. "You gotta learn control your anger. Sometimes you need to stand up and fight, but there's better ways. You do better with your head then your fists."

“I know, Grandpa,” Alex said.

“But you don’t know. You gotta do good in school. Your father, he stop school at sixteen.” Grandpa Pedro sighed. “He could a done great things, but he had to work to help the family. He be upset somewhere in heaven if you no take advantage of your education. He work hard trying to make a better life for you and Manuel. Don’t ever forget that.”

For the next couple days, Alex kept thinking about those words. The thought of his dad looking down at him from heaven and being upset bothered him.

Unfortunately, the relief the ice cream outings brought were short lived. Reality smacked him in the face at school. Word had it Saleen was planning on retaliating.

He had to end this. He thought of going to a teacher, but the last thing he wanted was to be a snitch.

Maybe he could approach Terron and try to make peace, but things had gone too far for that, and his friends wouldn’t go for it even if Terron did.

On Wednesday, Saleen and Jorge finally confronted him at recess.

“What’s going on?” Jorge asked. “How come you don’t want to hang with us no more?”

Saleen crossed his arms. “I thought we were tight.”

“We were tight.” Alex had to make his stand, right here, right now. “But I don’t wanna be involved with weapons and fighting. You guys are going to get into big, big trouble, man. Manny told me he seen guys like you before, and nothing good comes out of what you’re getting into. You’re going to end up dead or in jail. That’s not gonna happen to me.”

Saleen laughed and turned to Jorge. “Can you believe this? You’re becoming a punk-ass bitch.”

Jorge laughed with him. “Yeah.”

“What’s this crap?” Saleen asked. “You guys are going to get in trouble. Since when you ever care ‘bout that. You gotta remember

where you come from and who your friends are. We've always been there when you needed us. Now you abandon us right when we need you. Nothing but a punk ass bitch."

"Call me what you want," Alex said. "Listen. End this now, and nobody gets hurt."

Saleen laughed. "I am going to end this. They're goin' down hard. I ain't playin' with no knife anymore."

"What do you mean?" Alex felt the blood rush out of his face.

"You know what I mean," Saleen responded.

"Don't do it." Alex grabbed Jorge by his shirt and spoke in Spanish. "This is stupid. Don't get involved with it. Just walk away."

"No way," Jorge responded in English. "You're just chickenshit. Man, what happened to you?"

Part of Alex desperately wanted to go along with them, but he fought hard against that instinct. "Then do what you gotta do."

Saleen and Jorge turned and walked away from him.

"Nothing but a punk ass bitch," Saleen said loud enough for Alex to hear.

Alex stared at the ground. He had to do something before someone wound up dead.

He spent the next couple of classes thinking about how to diffuse the situation. When class ended, he would approach Terron. He had to think of something good to say, but everything that came to mind sounded stupid.

After the bell rang, he intercepted Terron on his way to his locker. Terron's fists clenched as Alex walked toward him.

"What do you want?" Terron had a mean scowl on his face.

Alex raised his hands. "Hey, I don't want any trouble, man. I just wanna talk to you."

Terron eyed him warily. "Then talk."

"I know there's some bad blood between you and some of my friends. Things are getting out of control. Just back down. I know you hate them, but if you don't people are gonna get hurt."

“Why should I?” Terron asked, his voice softening.

“Because nothing will get solved. What’s this gonna accomplish? You guys will still be fightin’ and hatin’ each other. It’ll only stop when someone dies. Is that what you really want? Just walk away. Please. I’m begging you.”

For a second, Alex thought he got through to Terron. Then two of Terron’s friends approached.

“What’s goin’ on?” one of his friends asked.

Alex’s eyes pleaded with him.

“I ain’t listening to you,” Terron said. “Come on. Let’s get out of here.”

Alex wanted to say something to get them to come back and listen, but it was too late. His chance to stop them had come and gone. He walked home with his hands in his pocket, dreading what the next day would bring.

Alex did everything he could think of to talk his way out of going to school, but Momma wouldn’t hear any of it. After throwing a fit and refusing to leave his room, Grandpa Pedro knocked. They sat next to each other on his bed.

“More problems at school?” Grandpa Pedro asked.

Alex nodded.

“Only one way take care of problems. You’re not a kid no more. After your daddy die, you have to grow faster. You have to be a man. A man faces his problems. It’s not always the easy thing, but it’s the right thing.”

“But, Grandpa, you don’t understand. Things at school—they’re out of control. I tried to make things better, but I don’t know what to do anymore.”

Grandpa Pedro held his hand to his chest. “You follow your heart.” He pointed to his head. “You use your brain, and you come out all right. Come on. I walk with you to school.”

Reluctantly Alex followed Grandpa Pedro into the kitchen. After he ate, he strapped on his backpack. Grandpa Pedro walked with him. When they reached school, Grandpa Pedro said, "In everything you do, you try to make your daddy proud."

Alex kept to himself all day long. During recess, he sat with his legs crossed and picked up small pebbles from the asphalt, flicking them, hoping nobody would notice him.

He looked up and found two groups of kids approaching each other at the other end of the school yard. He ran in their direction. Trouble was brewing.

Saleen led one group, Terron led the other. He moved closer to the action. The two groups exchanged heated words, which led to pushing and shoving.

Saleen got in Terron's face. "I'll mess you up, bitch."

Terron said, "I ain't goin nowhere. If you wanna get it on, then let's do it. We ain't afraid of you."

Jorge stepped between them. "Makes no sense to do anything now. Too many people around. Let's get it done after school. Four o'clock back at the flagpole. You guys better be there, 'cause we will."

The two groups broke apart. Alex sighed. Despite his efforts, this fight was still happening.

After recess, he thought hard about whether or not he should stick around. Part of him wanted to go home, do his homework, and hang out with his grandparents, but his morbid curiosity got the better of him. He had to know how this was going to play out. Not to mention, if someone got hurt, he could get help.

The rest of the day crawled past him. He watched each torturous minute on the clock tick by while his classmates gave each other nervous glances.

When the final bell rang signaling the end of the school day, Alex did not go home. With some time to kill, he went to McDonalds. Not having enough money on him to buy anything, he milled about and tried not to attract attention. He went inside and

asked for the time. It was three-forty.

After lingering for a couple of minutes, Alex walked back to school. He should have used the bathroom at the McDonalds, because now he had to go.

Not wanting to be seen, he approached a secluded place near the flagpole. Alex prayed that they had decided to call it off or that nobody would show.

Alex cursed when Terron Thomas and three others appeared.

A couple of minutes later, Jorge, Saleen, and a freckle-faced kid name Steve appeared. Alex felt a twinge of guilt knowing if he joined in, the sides would be even.

The angry words started immediately. He could not make out what they said since too many people were speaking at once. Saleen pushed Terron and the fight was on.

Terron pulled out a short, black switchblade. "You ain't the only one who can bring a blade to a fight."

Saleen, with his cornrow hair, stepped back, and smiled. "Figures a punk ass bitch like you would bring a knife to a gunfight." He pulled out a Ruger .22 caliber pistol.

Alex almost emptied his bladder. This was going from bad to worse. Alex fully expected someone to die, but wasn't prepared for what he was about to witness.

Chapter XXX

When Kevin started his latest angle of this investigation, he was hardly surprised to wind up in Haight-Ashbury. This neighborhood, which was where the hippie movement of the sixties and the Manson family got their start, was a haven for loonies and freaks, something which gave it character.

Earlier that morning, Kevin combed the internet and made numerous calls, concluding that the best source of information in the country on Voodoo was New Orleans. Unfortunately, he didn't have the time to go while Conjesero was busy carving up new victims. Instead, he settled for a local Voodoo priest.

Kevin walked to the C&C Candle Shop. Between the foot traffic and the people riding the streets and sidewalks on motorized scooters, it was an adventure.

He chose the C&C Candle Shop because a source told him the owner of the store, Jean Dusse, was the genuine article. Dusse, in his late fifties, had emigrated from Haiti where he had been a well-respected and powerful houngan or Voodoo priest. In San Francisco, he was merely a storeowner trying to make a living by selling trinkets and spiritual counseling to tourists. Dusse operated a thriving business and had opened additional candle shops in the Bay Area.

When Kevin walked into the store, he spotted an attractive young Haitian woman behind the counter, ringing up the sale of two Voodoo dolls, a book of spells, and several vials of potion oils to a smiling middle aged couple, hardly the type of people he would have thought would shop here.

When they left, Kevin approached the counter. "Hi. Are they your usual clientele?"

The woman smiled. "We get all kinds here. You would be surprised. For instance, one never knows when a police officer like yourself will appear."

Kevin's brows rose. "I didn't think I was so obvious. Actually I'm here on official business. I need to speak with Jean Dusse."

The woman's demeanor immediately changed. She turned her body slightly and tallied up some receipts. "I'm afraid Mr. Dusse is not in today. What sort of business do you seek with him?"

This woman wasn't about to help him. He needed to get past her. His voice softened. "There's no need to be concerned. He's not in any trouble. I am just conducting an investigation and was hoping that he can give me some information. I would greatly appreciate speaking to Mr. Dusse."

The woman still did not look up at him. "I am afraid you will have to return some other time. He is not available."

She turned her back to him. Kevin was about to use some more persuasion when a tall dark figure emerged from the doorway.

"It's okay." His voice resonated throughout the storefront. "I will see him." He extended his hand. "I am Jean Dusse."

Jean Dusse wore a bright turquoise and green robe. He was slender with dark skin. His hair was beginning to show signs of gray.

Kevin shook the houngan's hand. "Detective Kevin Russell of the SFPD. I'm performing a criminal investigation of recent murders and was hoping you could help me out."

Jean Dusse gazed at him, his eyes not betraying any emotion. "Please step into my office." He motioned Kevin to the door he had come from.

Kevin followed Dusse to the back as the woman at the counter eyed him warily.

They entered a room that was almost as large as the storefront filled with idols and figurines that he presumed were the store's inventory.

"Would you care for some herbal tea?" Dusse offered.

"No thank you," Kevin said. "These figures and statues, they remind me of saints in the Catholic religion."

Dusse stared down at him with an appraising look. "The Voudun religion, commonly referred to as Voodoo, along with other

religions like Lucumi, Macumba, and Yoruba use your Catholic saints as symbols for our gods.”

“Is that right?”

“When the Westerners came to Africa they imposed their ways upon the people. In order to appease the white slave masters they had to adopt their religion. They kept their own religion by using statues of Catholic saints, pretending to pray to them, while still keeping the old traditions. When the African natives were enslaved and shipped to the Americas, they brought their religion with them. Voudun priests were either killed or imprisoned when they reached Haiti and the other islands of the West Indies. The only way for them to survive was to go underground or to use Christian symbols.”

“Interesting. I didn’t know that,” Kevin said.

“I am rather certain there is much you do not know about this subject.”

“Which is why I’m here to see you.”

“Most of the Western world sees Voudun as being inherently evil. When people hear the term Voodoo, they associate it with human sacrifice and cannibalism, a myth propagated by Hollywood, but in truth, Detective, Voudun is very similar to Christianity.”

“How so?” Kevin didn’t come expecting a lecture about Voudun, but he was fascinated by the subject, nearly forgetting his purpose for being here.

“Both religions believe in a Supreme Being. Both believe in an afterlife. Like Catholicism, we also have ritual sacrifices involving flesh and blood.”

“I’m not Catholic, but I believe theirs are more symbolic. I don’t think Catholics actually consume flesh and blood during their masses.”

Dusse shrugged. “It all amounts to the same thing.”

Kevin studied the houngan. Like the woman at the counter, the man radiated distrust. “You mentioned earlier that Voodoo, I mean Voudun, is not evil, but is it possible that there are people who use it for evil intent?”

Dusse sipped his herbal tea and gazed absently. “There are caplatas, those who practice evil sorcery, also known as black magic. I believe your Hollywood represents such things in the form of sticking pins into dolls, but there are very few of them.”

“Have you ever heard of one of these evil priests who can change their shape, who can shift into different creatures?”

Dusse’s face tightened. “No. Why do you ask such questions?”

Kevin pressed the houngan. “Because I need to find out about Conjesero.”

Dusse flinched. “I don’t know what you speak of.”

“Listen, Mr. Dusse,” Kevin implored, “I’m not here to expose your religion as evil. I’m not here to attack the Voudun religion in any way, but people are being killed. At least eight people have died over the past couple of weeks, the last being the reporter who was trying to uncover the story. Conjesero is to blame. I need to find out everything I can about him. Please tell me what you know.”

“I am sorry that people are dying. But I assure you that there is nothing I can do to help.”

Kevin raised his voice. “Why? Because you don’t know anything, or are you afraid of standing up to Conjesero?”

Dusse got in Kevin’s face. “You know not of what you speak.” He backed down and moved away. “Detective Russell, there is no bigger fool than the one who does not know his limitations.”

Kevin lowered his voice. “Listen, I’m not asking you to help me stop Conjesero. I wouldn’t ask that of anyone. That is my cross to bear. I need information. Who is he? Where can I find him?”

“I have nothing further to say to you. Please leave.”

Figuring he had nothing to lose, Kevin said, “Earlier you told me that Voudun is a good religion, but I have some doubts. You’re just a weak, scared man, not one who believes in doing what is right. I’ll see myself out the door.”

Kevin left his card with the cashier in case Dusse changed his mind. Dusse was the fourth person he saw that day. The others were charlatans, looking to scam the public.

When he returned to the office, he had five voice messages waiting for him. The only one he returned was from Manny Marquez, which was why he avoided giving people his cell. He dialed Manny's cell and was in luck when the kid answered.

"What's goin' on, Detective Russell?" Manny asked.

"I've had better days. How about things in Palo Alto?"

"Working hard, busting my ass studying for a Calculus exam on Monday. I saw that reporter got killed. I'm guessing by Conjesero."

"That's my thought as well," Kevin said. "Matt Szatko broke the story about these murders. My guess is that Szatko would have eventually figured out Conjesero's identity and was killed. I think he also wanted to send a message. Anyone gets in his way, he's going to crush them."

"What have you found out?"

"Nothing of value," Kevin replied. "Your grandfather said that Conjesero was a practitioner of Voodoo, so I tried to talk to some Voodoo priests, but nobody was willing to help."

"So you've come back to ask me to help you out."

"Not exactly," Kevin said. "Just wanted to see how you were doing."

"I'm fine. Listen, you need to take a trip down to Mexico. That's where it all started. Maybe you can see that Carlos Guerreuro character."

"Maybe. But I can't leave right now, especially after Szatko being killed."

"How about my grandfather and I go down and find out what you need to know?"

"No way. Your grandfather's an old man and you're just a kid. We'll see what happens. All right, go back to your studying. I'll keep in touch."

"You got it, Detective Russell."

Kevin hung up. He had to be desperate to even consider enlisting their help, but at this point he was willing to do anything to stop Conjesero.

Chapter XXXI

Saleen held the .22 in his hand as Terron froze and dropped his knife.

Terron stepped back. “Don’t do it man. Look, we can work this out.” Terron trembled. “Just put the gun down, man. Ain’t gonna solve nothing if you pull the trigger.”

“I think it will,” Saleen said. “I’ll be rid of your sorry ass.”

From behind Terron came a crunching sound, similar to glass breaking. Everyone looked toward the sound except Saleen and Terron, who continued their stare down.

“Come on, man. Put it away. This doesn’t have to go down this way.” Terron was near tears.

Saleen always had a rough edge, but could he really shoot someone?

A roar came from behind the boys. Terron took advantage of this distraction by knocking over Saleen, sending the gun sprawling.

“Holy shit,” Marlon, one of Terron’s friends yelled. His face turned pale.

Alex’s jaw dropped. What he saw was impossible. Not more than fifty feet away was a dragon, yes a real-life fire-breathing dragon. Unlike dragons in movies, this one was small and compact, no more than ten feet in length. Large, thick green scales covered its body. It had large, fiery red eyes, and sharp talons jutting out of its feet. The dragon was perched on the brick wall on the side of the school building. Its large nostrils vented smoke.

The two closest to the creature, Marlon and Jose, had no chance to react. The dragon surged from the wall and toppled them. Simultaneously, it sunk its teeth into Marlon’s neck and shot its right front leg at Jose. Its talons pierced the boy’s stomach, sending him staggering to the ground while he gasped for breath. Jose tried to scramble away, but the talons slashed his body, tearing his chest and stomach. Within seconds, he was an unrecognizable mass of gore.

While Saleen and Terron struggled on the floor, the other three

boys did not move.

“Let’s get out of here!” Jorge shouted.

The dragon finished off Marlon and Jose and started beating its wings. It flew, then descended sharply in front of Jorge, blocking their exit. Jorge stopped just short of the dragon. It pawed at Jorge, knocking him to the ground. It then swiped at Jorge with its front left paw, smashing his head against the ground.

Steve, the freckle-faced kid standing next to Jorge, ran past Saleen and Terron. Meanwhile, Stan, a quiet kid with a lisp ran after Steve.

The dragon did not move. Instead it shot a solid stream of green liquid from its mouth. The first blast hit Stan, who gave an inhuman shriek. The second blast hit Steve’s back, knocking him over. The effects of the green liquid were fast and deadly, stripping much of their skin off their bodies. Before his eyes, their flesh melted.

Saleen and Terron released each other.

“What the fuck is that?” Saleen asked.

“I don’t know,” Terron replied. “Come on. Let’s get out of there.”

Ten minutes ago, Alex wouldn’t have thought it possible, but Terron rose to his feet and extend his hand. Saleen grabbed his hand and got to his feet.

Alex stared in disbelief when the dragon curled its mouth and... smiled? Terron’s scream broke him out of his daze. This was insane. Here was a dragon, which couldn’t possibly exist, smiling at Terron and Saleen.

Saleen grabbed Terron’s arm. “Let’s split up. You go right. I go left.”

Terron nodded.

Alex prayed that somehow they could escape, but knew they had no chance.

Within seconds, the dragon scooped up Saleen and carried him with its front two legs. Saleen shrieked and flailed his arms and legs,

but the dragon's claws dug deep into his ribs.

It turned and went after Terron. Before he could run twenty feet, the winged creature hovered above him. It dropped Saleen on top of Terron, causing both of them to crash into the concrete. Terron hit the concrete face-first, while Saleen smashed his knee. He yelped in pain and clutched his mangled knee.

Before they could get up, it came back toward them, flapping its wings slowly. Saleen turned his head and look up as saliva dripped on his face. With its mighty jaws, it snapped Saleen's neck. After the dragon released its grip, his limp body slumped to the ground.

"No, no," cried Terron. "Please let me go."

It snapped its head at Terron's upper front torso, its jaws clamping on his stomach and chest, tearing into his flesh. He screamed as the dragon chomped on his flesh.

It craned its neck, surveying the damage. Alex's heart nearly stopped beating when it turned in his direction.

This whole time, Alex had not moved or spoken a word. He saw them die, one by one. He fully expected to see people get hurt today, but not the massacre he witnessed.

Alex's fear turned into panic when the dragon flew toward him. He thought the creature hadn't seen him, but now it was going to kill him as well. Instead of flying it walked on four legs. Alex looked into its intelligent eyes. He thought about making a run for it, but knew he couldn't outrun it.

His body shook as it got closer, the heat coming from its breath making his skin crawl.

The dragon stooped over Jorge's outstretched body. Jorge twitched. Amazingly, he was still alive. His eyes glazed, Jorge tried to get to his knees, wavering back and forth. Alex's heart sunk. His best friend was going to die, and there was nothing he could do to save him.

The dragon hovered over its final victim. It thought this little

boy had died after the first blow. After seeing Jorge go down, it had turned its attention to the others, so that they would not flee, confident that no one would accidentally stumble on this highly secluded area. If any unfortunate witnesses arrived, they would also die.

Jorge turned onto his back and tried to scramble out of the way. No way, little boy. It knocked him to the ground with a swipe of its wings.

The dragon stalked Jorge as he crawled, enjoying every moment of this. Using one of its paws, it stepped on his left leg. Jorge weakly kicked at it. It removed its paw from Jorge's leg, trying to give him false confidence that he could escape. He allowed Jorge to move unimpeded for a few meters.

The dragon lunged at Jorge, knocking him to the ground. The boy screamed for help, but the dragon quieted him by smashing a paw onto the back of his head, driving it against the concrete. Jorge groaned, his face covered with blood.

It had it's fun, but now it was time to end this little game. The dragon dug its massive teeth into the boy's back, tearing flesh and severing his spinal cord. It continued to chomp on him, swallowing chunks of flesh.

It looked around at the gory remains, fully satisfied.

Alex fought back tears. If that monster heard him crying, then he would become its next victim. He felt as if he had died as well. He had known Jorge his whole life. They had been best friends before this recent falling out.

Guilt consumed him for standing back and hiding while Jorge and the others died, but he knew the creature would kill him just as easily as it killed the others.

Alex's hands trembled violently. The creature still had not noticed him. He prayed more fervently than he ever had in his life that he would be able to get out of here alive.

Alex stared opened-mouth at something even more shocking than the dragon itself. So stunned, he nearly fell forward as its wings retracted into its body, then shrunk and went inward, before disappearing all together.

The scales slowly disappeared, and skin replaced them. The skin turned from dark brown to a lighter tone. The creatures rear legs turned upright and the scales once again changed into skin.

“My God,” Alex whispered, his voice barely audible.

Its front legs mutated, decreasing in length and increasing in girth. The scales turned to skin and its arms straightened. Its nose became shorter and its head enlarged. Human mouth and teeth formed. The only thing that didn’t change was those haunting eyes.

The creature’s spine straightened. Hair formed on top of its head, on its legs, and chest. As the transformation continued Alex felt a strange sense of familiarity with the person taking shape.

It walked out of Alex’s view. His heart thundered as he contemplated making a run for it.

Alex waited an eternity before it came back, now as a man. Fully clothed, he carried two large burlap sacks, his back turned to Alex.

The man dumped each boy into the sacks. Alex put his hand to his mouth, feeling nausea. How could someone do this?

The last remaining body belonged to Jorge. Tears streamed down Alex’s face, but he remained quiet as he saw his friend for the last time. The man put Jorge’s body in the sack, and tied it with a rope.

Alex froze as the man turned around. Impossible. How could it be?

The man carried the sacks with ease, as if they were stacks of feathers instead of bodies, toward the school.

Alex quietly scooted from his cover. The last little bit of his sanity snapped when he saw the man in full view.

He hid behind a corner of the school building as the man dragged away the bodies. Alex followed and hid behind a pillar.

As the man moved forward, Alex maintained a safe distance,

carefully concealing himself, his heart racing

He was hardly surprised when the man opened a door and entered the building. After all, this was where Farrell's janitor, Mr. Bojorquez, spent most of his day.

Chapter XXXII

Alex staggered home in a daze, bumping into several people and nearly hitting a car as he crossed a street.

The driver of the car yelled, “Watch where you’re going, you little bastard.”

Once past his school, Alex could not stop crying. He wanted to lock himself in his room and never leave. The only person in the world who could help him was Manny. His brother had told him he would stop by after his last class on Friday, but that wasn’t soon enough. He had to talk to him now. Manny would take care of things and make sure it turned out okay.

By the time he reached home, Alex could hardly remember walking back from school. He took out his key and opened up the door. He burst into tears as he ran past his grandparents. He ran straight to his room and onto his bed.

His grandparents walked into his room a few minutes later, concern etched into their faces. They couldn’t help him.

His grandmother held him close to her as he sobbed. His grandfather paced around the room. Alex was glad they didn’t try to talk to him.

Alex continued for ten minutes. When he stopped, Grandpa Pedro sat next to him. “Alejandro, what happened?” he asked in Spanish.

Alex did not respond. What could he tell them? He sat and stared at the wall.

His grandmother straightened his hair and wiped tears off his face. She sang a lullaby in Spanish as he stared at the wall. It felt as if he had fallen off the edge of the world.

Mechanically, Alex said, “I need to talk to Manny. Please call him.”

Manny had his head buried in his Multi-Variate Calculus book when his cell rang. He was too wrapped up in his homework to talk to anyone right now.

His roommate David picked up his cell phone and answered, then turned to Manny. "I don't know what the person's saying. They're speaking in Spanish."

"Why did you answer the phone? Manny asked.

David shrugged. "It might be important, or maybe some hot chick asking you on a date and she has an equally hot friend that you can set me up with."

Manny sighed, put his pencil down, and picked up the phone. "Hello."

On the other side, his grandfather said in Spanish, "Something is wrong with Alejandro. He came home and went right to his room and started crying. He kept on going on and on and wouldn't stop. I tried to find out what happened, but he wouldn't say anything, only that he needed to speak to you."

"Shit," Manny muttered. "Okay, put him on the phone."

"No. You need to come over. I've never see him like this. Something bad happened. Real bad."

"Okay, okay." Manny's studies would have to wait. "I'll be over there in a half hour."

He hung up the phone. "Shit. Shit. Shit."

"What's wrong?" David lowered the volume on his stereo.

"Something's wrong with Alex. He ain't talkin', but he wants to see me. I gotta go."

David frowned. "But you got the Calc exam coming up. What about our late night study session? It's not like you to just take up and leave."

Manny shrugged. "I gotta catch the bus as soon as I can."

"Forget that." David went to his drawer and got the keys to his Volkswagen Jetta. "Take my car."

"Are you sure?"

"Of course I'm sure. I'll show you where I parked it."

Manny grabbed his jacket and backpack. “Hey, I can’t thank you enough for this.”

“No need to thank me. Take care of whatever you need to take care of and get back as soon as possible. I have to help you study for this exam. Don’t forget our deal—you get an A in Calc, then you have to set me up with one of the girls from your old neighborhood.”

Manny grinned. “Don’t worry. I’ll hook ya up.”

He sped all of the way to San Francisco in David’s Jetta and ran through several red lights, not caring if he got a ticket. He arrived almost at the same time as his mother. Her shift at the Cantina was still going on, so his grandfather must have called her.

Rosa Marquez raced to the house past Manny. “What’s wrong with Alejandro?”

His grandmother shook her head. “He won’t talk.”

She started to walk up the stairs, but Manny grabbed her arm. “Let me talk to him.”

Manny felt her maternal need to take care of her child, but she would be hysterical, and that wouldn’t help anyone.

Pedro nodded to her.

Her face sagged as she stepped aside.

As Manny walked up the steps, he hoped this was a lot of drama about Alex overreacting to something insignificant, but he knew his brother wouldn’t react like this unless it was serious.

He went to Alex’s room, the one they shared when he came home. Alex had his face buried in his pillow.

“Hey what’s going on, little brother?”

Alex’s head popped up. Tears formed in his eyes. “They’re all dead, Manny. All of them.”

Manny’s heart raced. “Who’s dead?”

“All of them,” Alex replied in a monotonous tone. “Saleen, Terron, Marlon, Jose, Steve, Stan. Jorge is dead. I’ve known him since I could remember, and now he’s dead.”

Manny sat next to his brother and took a deep breath. None of this made a bit of sense. “What happened? Talk to me.”

“It was a dragon. It killed them all. Saleen pulled a gun on Terron, and then the dragon tore them all apart. I saw it all.”

“Dragon?” Under ordinary circumstances, he would think his brother had developed a hyperactive imagination. Not today. He breathed hard.

“But it wasn’t a dragon. It was the janitor.”

“All right, Alex. Start from the beginning. Tell me everything that happened.”

Alex’s story shook Manny to his core. If Alex was telling the truth, then that could only mean his younger brother had witnessed Conjesero first-hand. His heart broke imagining how awful it must have been for Alex to witness such depravities.

“Did he see you?” Manny asked.

“No.”

Manny hugged him. “You’re lucky to make it out alive. Listen, I’m going to make sure nothing bad happens to you. You remember that guy who was over here the other day?”

Alex nodded.

“He’s a cop, a detective actually, and he was asking Grandpa about the person you saw. His real name is Conjesero, and Grandpa encountered him way back in Mexico when he was young. Anyway, Detective Russell’s going to nail this bastard, and I’m going to help him.”

Alex clutched Manny’s arm. “No. I don’t want you to go nowhere near him. You don’t know what he can do.”

“Someone has to stop him or a lot more people are going to die. I can’t live with that. Listen, I’m going to call Detective Russell now, and he’s going to come over and talk to you. This guy can help us. Trust me.”

Manny left the room and found his mom and grandparents at the kitchen table. “Alex saw Conjesero today. He killed seven kids from what I can gather.”

Pedro's faced turned ashen.

"He knows Conjesero's identity."

His mom raised her voice. "Conjesero is just a story. It's a fairy tale. It doesn't exist."

"No." Grandpa's voice tightened. "He's real. I saw him when I was a young man."

"I have to call Detective Russell." Manny pulled the detective's business card out of his wallet and dialed the number to his office. After four rings, his voice mail picked up. Manny left a message telling him to call his mother's house immediately.

Manny was about to put the card back when he noticed a handwritten number on the card, so he dialed that number.

When Manny explained that something urgent regarding the case just developed, Detective Russell told him he would be there in ten minutes.

Manny went upstairs to check on Alex. His mother was in the room. Seeing Alex's haunted eyes devastated him. He prayed that this wouldn't scar his little brother for the rest of his life.

"Detective Russell will be here soon," Manny said. "You're going to have to tell him everything you told to me, okay."

"I don't want to," Alex said.

Manny sat down and put his arm around Alex. "I know, but he's the guy who can stop this janitor."

"What janitor?" His mom shouted. "What did the janitor do?"

"I'll tell you later, Mom," Manny said.

Manny tried to talk to Alex about other things, just to get his mind off this tragedy. They talked about what they were going to do this weekend when Manny came home, but Alex only half-heartedly participated in the conversation.

The doorbell rang. Manny jumped off the bed and raced down the stairs. His grandfather had already opened the door.

After closing the door behind him, the detective asked, "So what's happening?"

"Come upstairs with me. Conjesero struck again today in big

way. My little brother was there. He saw everything.”

Detective Russell’s eyes went wide. “What? When did this happen?”

“Alex will tell you all about it.”

They entered the room where Alex sat with their mom.

“Hello, Mrs. Marquez.” She stood and shook his hand. “I just want to ask your son some questions about what he witnessed earlier today.”

“I wish someone would let me know, Señõr.” His mom sighed. “Okay. I’ll be downstairs.”

Kevin pulled up a chair from the corner of the room and sat in front of Alex. “Hi, Alex. I know what you saw today must have been horrible. You’re incredibly brave just holding up the way you are. Most kids wouldn’t be able to handle this.”

Alex smiled.

“Now I need to ask you about what you saw today. I know it’s tough. Believe me I wish that I didn’t have to, but you can help me get this guy. Together, we can save lives. You can be a hero.”

Knowing how Alex distrusted cops, Manny crouched over him. “It’s cool. Just tell him what you told me.”

Alex nodded. Slowly he retold the same shocking story he told Manny. Detective Russell stopped him every once in a while to ask a question or encourage him to continue.

When Alex finished, Detective Russell said, “Thanks, Alex. You did great. I admire you for being so strong. And we’re going to nail this bastard. I swear to you, we will.”

Manny said, “Come on, Alex, let’s go downstairs.”

When they entered the living room, Detective Russell turned to Manny. “Hey, I left something in my car. Would you mind giving me a hand?”

“Sure.”

“Pedro, would you mind helping us out?” Detective Russell asked.

Manny’s grandfather nodded and went outside with them. Once

outside, Kevin said, “Does your grandfather know what happened today?”

Manny replied, “No. Alex only told us two.”

Kevin ran down Alex’s statement from his notes.

Manny’s grandfather said, “My God. After all the years, he back now. I wish I do something when I was young, but I do nothing and he kill and kill again.”

The detective put his hand on Grandpa Pedro’s shoulder. “What could you have done by yourself? He would have killed just like he killed the rest of them folks and then you wouldn’t be here to help me now.” He turned to Manny. “You know your younger brother better than anybody else. Is there any way he could have made this up?”

“No. Absolutely not. I’ve never seen him like this. He’s scared shitless.”

The detective nodded. “I believe him, too.”

“So now what?” Grandpa asked.

“I’m going to verify that all seven kids are missing. Then I’m going to the school to look around. Even if this janitor took the bodies inside, there has to be some evidence on the school grounds. I’m going to try to find out as much as I can about this janitor. I hate that Alex had to see his friends die, but the truth is, this may be the first break in the case.”

“I hope you don’t plan on arresting Conjesero,” Grandpa Pedro said.

Detective Russell’s face tightened. “I have no intention of taking him in alive. Having a shape-shifting Voodoo priest in custody would make no sense.”

“Good.”

They walked back inside. Manny breathed easier when Alex seemed content eating a cupcake.

“I want to thank everyone for their help and cooperation,” Detective Russell said. “I have to go now. I have a lot of work to do.”

Conjesero

“Have you eaten yet?” Manny’s mom asked.

“No. I’ll probably grab a bite to eat somewhere.”

“Nonsense. You are a guest in my house. I will feed you. You too, Manuel.”

“Look, Mrs. Marquez, I appreciate your generosity, but I’ll have to take a rain check. I will take you up on your offer. Promise.”

Manny wished he could join the detective. He vowed to himself that he would do whatever he could to stop Conjesero.

Chapter XXXIII

Kevin called the superintendent of Alex's school. "Mr. Diaz, I regret to inform you that seven of your students at Farrell Elementary are missing. I'm conducting an investigation."

There was silence on the other end of the line. When the man finally spoke, he sounded like a frightened child. "Seven students? I don't understand. What happened to them?"

Despite the man's seemingly genuine concern, he couldn't share any meaningful information. "I strongly suspect foul play. As I said, I am conducting an investigation. I'm going to need complete access to all areas of the school building, including the records."

Composure returned to the superintendent's voice. "Of course, you will have my full cooperation, along with that of my staff."

Kevin checked the police precincts near the school and the bordering neighborhoods for missing person's reports on the seven boys. Only three reports had been filed.

He got addresses for the remaining kids, and went to each of their houses. None of the family members knew where the children were. Sadly enough, several didn't even realize they were missing.

When he returned to his police station, he filed reports for the remaining four boys. So far, everything Alex said checked out. The boy was telling the truth. He prided himself on being able to read people, and Alex had exhibited genuine terror when he interviewed the boy.

By the time he finished filing the reports, it was nine in the evening. He drove through Union Square and Chinatown to Farrell Elementary School, then parked his car a few blocks from the school. The janitor had probably left by now, but he didn't want to take any chances in arousing his suspicion. Carrying a flashlight, he treaded lightly into the school grounds. Other than two large lights at the main entrance, it was mostly covered in darkness. The parking lot had only a few parked cars.

He casually walked on the sidewalk past the building. When he passed the school, he circled back hiding behind trees and bushes. He found the flagpole that Alex mentioned. This had to be where Alex hid. Before turning on the flashlight he searched the area, but could not find anyone. After turning on his flashlight, he had a clear view of the area behind the school.

Kevin stepped toward the building. The area was mostly paved cement. There was a twenty by twenty feet section of grass on the right corner of the building. He scanned the ground, looking for traces of blood, but saw none. Dropping to his hands and knees, he touched the wet ground. He crawled and felt the pavement. Also wet. Further down he found thick, white powder. He tasted it. Soap. Someone had just washed it. He couldn't think of a reason why someone would want to wash the pavement unless they were trying to conceal something, further convincing him of the validity of Alex's story.

The glint of a metal object near the steps leading to the back entrance of the school caught Kevin's attention. As he got closer, he realized it was a .22 caliber pistol.

He put the flashlight down, reached into his inside jacket pocket, and pulled out a pair of latex gloves and an evidence bag. He donned the gloves and shoved the wrapper into his pants pockets. He opened the sealed evidence bag and put the gun into the bag. He had little doubt that the fingerprints on the weapon would match those of Saleen Rashid.

His eyes opened wide. Just beyond where he found the gun was a Nike sneaker. Inside the sneaker was a bloody sock. "Bingo." He put the sock and sneaker in an evidence bag to have analyzed.

Kevin shook his head. Conjesero had killed the boys in a place where someone like Alex could have witnessed the killings. Then he took the time to clean the blood, but left behind evidence. What game was he playing? Knowing what he knew, Kevin surmised he had done this on purpose. It was like he was leaving little crumbs for Kevin to follow, daring him to pick up on his trail.

Something on the ground glistened in the moonlight. He picked it up. If he had any doubt about the validity of Alex's story, they were gone now. In his hand, he held thick, golden scales, unlike anything he had ever seen before. They had to be scales from the dragon Alex described.

He drove back to the station to stash the evidence. He then looked for Rita, but couldn't find her. She was the only one he could confide in. He had to see her tomorrow before going to Farrell.

Kevin woke up before the crack of dawn. After tossing and turning for a couple hours, he knew he wasn't going to getting any more sleep. All he could think about was Conjesero impersonating a janitor at Farrell Elementary.

He put on a pair of shorts and a tee shirt and went for a brisk early morning jog. He had to clear his mind and come up with a game plan. After his early morning jog, Kevin fixed himself a breakfast of blueberry muffins and coffee, eating slowly as he worked through different scenarios.

He arrived at the police station just past six and checked for messages. Another message from the warden at the prison. Ray Holman requested to speak to him again. What the hell is wrong with that moron? Apparently Holman hadn't figured out that Kevin had conned his trust to get a confession. Holman had been making these requests on a daily basis. If he wasn't so busy with the Conjesero case, he would visit Holman just to rattle his cage.

Kevin went to the forensics lab to get the gun he had collected the previous evening dusted for fingerprints, then busied himself with paper work. Before Captain Bishop had a chance to pin him down to get an update on the case, Kevin left the station.

He arrived at Farrell before classes started. Many of the students had already arrived. Shortly after walking through the main entrance, Diaz, the school district's superintendent, and the school's principal, a young, elegantly dressed woman named Vanessa Fox, greeted him.

“Have you found out anything about the boys’ whereabouts?” Vanessa asked. “I contacted their families this morning. They’re still missing. I’ve been worried sick.”

Kevin shook his head.

“Do you have any idea what happened?” Vanessa asked.

“That’s what I’m trying to determine.” Kevin had to be careful with what he said. He stopped when he saw a file cabinet labeled personnel. He had to get to Bojorquez’s file. “I’d like to interview some of the teachers of the missing students.”

Vanessa Fox frowned. “Sure. I’ll get the teachers’ schedules.”

“Thank you,” Kevin said. “Is there a room I could use to review their personnel files?”

As soon as the principal and the superintendent left, he opened the drawer, and sifted through the files until he found the one belonging to Juan Antonio Bojorquez. Bojorquez was hired just over a year ago, right after the killings in Fresno. The only thing he couldn’t figure out was why there were no more similar killings in San Francisco from the time Bojorquez moved here until the past couple of weeks. Maybe he had become bolder and more arrogant and thought nobody could stop him. Kevin was hell-bent on proving him wrong.

Other than that the hiring date and a photo, they had little information on the man. His past employment included janitorial jobs in Northern California over the past twenty years. In all likelihood, nobody had bothered to do any fact checking.

Kevin jotted down the address they had on file and returned the folder. He would have to see if the janitor used that name while traveling through California.

The principal returned with the schedules. “I hope this will help.”

“I’m sure it will. Would it be okay to look around the school before speaking to the teachers?”

Mr. Diaz and Vanessa glanced at each other.

“Of course,” Mr. Diaz said. “I will have someone accompany

you.”

“No. I’ll manage it by myself.” The last thing he wanted was to explain his actions.

He left the office. When he had been in elementary school, the cleaning supplies had been stored in the school’s basement, right near the cafeteria and the gym. If that was the case with this school, that’s where Bojorquez would be stationed. He walked down the stairs and found a hallway leading to an empty cafeteria.

He searched the cafeteria and the adjacent rooms. No signs of cleaning supplies. He had to find the entrance Alex had seen Bojorquez go into after killing those boys. He would either have Alex identify it on a building layout, or bring the kid back to school, something he wanted to avoid after what the boy had been through.

Kevin continued to search the basement, but found nothing useful. The same held true with the gym and adjacent rooms.

If he ran into Bojorquez, it would be pointless to arrest the man. He could never prove in a court of law the truth about him. That left him with one option. Hunt the monster down and kill him. Tonight, he would stake out the man’s place. When he saw him, he would shoot to kill. No questions asked.

Kevin gave up looking for the room. He didn’t want to ask direct questions about Bojorquez but needed an excuse to look for him.

He walked back up the stairs he had come from and retraced his way back to the principal’s office, where he found Vanessa Fox. “I was just at the rear of the building nearby the flagpole, and I noticed some cleaning residue on the pavement. My guess is that your janitor did some cleaning out back. I was wondering if I could speak to him, and see if he saw anything unusual.”

“Sure,” she responded. “Come with me, and we’ll try to find him. He usually doesn’t stay in one place, but we should be able to track him down.”

He followed her out of the office. They went the opposite way Kevin had gone earlier. As they passed classrooms, he wondered

how the kids' would react to finding out that seven of their classmates were missing. Kevin gritted his teeth, a raging hatred burning inside of him. That monster killed seven children.

She led Kevin past a set of double doors. Inside of the storage room were buckets, mops, and cleaning agents.

"Mr. Bojorquez," the principal called out. There was no response. She walked further into the room. Kevin reached for his gun and flicked the safety. "Mr. Bojorquez." There was still no answer. "I guess he's out and about somewhere. Sometimes, I go weeks without seeing the man. As long as the school remains clean, that's all anyone really cares about. I don't have much interaction with him."

Kevin waved his hand. "That's fine. I'll try to catch up to him later. Well, I'll be on my way."

"I thought you wanted to speak to the teachers of the missing students."

Kevin had forgotten about that. "Yes, yes I do, but I just received a text from my captain, and he told me there was a new lead he wanted me to investigate. I'll have to come back later. I'll be in contact with you."

She walked him out of the school, and he shook her hand.

"If you find out anything, Detective, please let me know."

"I sure will."

Juan Antonio smiled as the detective drove out of the parking lot. From the articles written by the dearly departed Matt Szatko, he knew the detective was the one investigating the Golden Gate Massacre.

Now why would a homicide detective investigate the disappearances of seven missing boys? He didn't have to be intimately familiar with the inner workings of the San Francisco Police Department to know this wasn't standard procedure.

The simple answer was the most obvious one. He knew.

Somehow, the detective pieced together that these seven missing boys were connected to the case he was investigating. He had been careful in disposing of the bodies. There was no way they could have been found, therefore they wouldn't be considered dead, just missing, and there would be no need for a homicide detective. Unless, of course, he thought there was a link to the murders he was investigating.

Juan Antonio laughed. This detective was damn sharp. He was no plodding amateur. Perhaps a little too smart for his own good. He reveled in his good fortune. Finally, an opportunity to square up against a worthy adversary. It had been so long. The Mexican authorities were such a joke that he grew bored with them. Detective Russell, please do not disappoint me. Just like Matt Szatko before him, he had to provide a little lesson for the detective.

Chapter XXXIV

Juan Antonio Bojorquez, formerly known as Miguel Diaz, formerly known as Angel Garcia, also known as Conjesero, planned his assault with the eagerness of a young man ready to set out on an adventure from his secret place, the boiler room of the Farrell Elementary School.

At first, he contemplated a direct strike but he wanted something more dramatic that would fracture Russell's psyche.

He had dealt with police in Mexico, Haiti, the Dominican Republic and other locales. In the end, they cowered away from him in fear. Although the law enforcement in this country was more sophisticated, they too would know fear.

Russell was undoubtedly craftier and smarter than the others he had dealt with in the past. His work in capturing the Hail Mary Rapist was exemplary, but Holman was a gnat and he was a dragon. Juan Antonio would crush the little man who thought that he could interfere with Conjesero.

Conjesero had a variety of transportation options available to him and therefore never learned to drive. The thought of being stuck in traffic agitated him. He enjoyed soaring through the air, so majestic and on top of the world, so today he took the form of a falcon.

He ascended enough to avoid being seen by the naked eye. When he neared his destination, he slowly descended, searching for an inconspicuous place to change. He circled the area until he spotted a long alleyway between apartment buildings.

He swooped down, feeling the rush of wind against his feathers, and landed on steps. He turned his falcon head and noticed something he had not seen at first, a drunken homeless man. He flapped his wings and shrieked.

The bum's twisted face stared at him. "What's that over there?"

Conjesero shrieked and rushed at him, going straight for the neck. The man screamed as he dug his claws into his dirt encrusted flannel shirt.

The man flailed wildly. He dug his beak into the bum's neck, piercing his flesh. Blood trickled down the man's neck. He finally got his hands around Conjesero's falcon neck, and tried to force him off, but Conjesero was not about to budge. Instead, he buried his beak into the man's neck.

The bum cried in agony, blood streaming down his chest. In an act of desperation, he charged at the brick wall of the apartment building that bordered the alley. Conjesero hung on to him. Just before hitting the wall, he swooped into the air, allowing the bum to crash against the wall.

Conjesero hovered over the man, who stopped moving. When he raised his hand, Conjesero flew down and bit his hand out of spite. Wanting to end this, he dug his claws into the man's face, then plucked out his right eyeball out of its socket. He then went for the throat, tearing the man's jugular vein.

With no one else to interrupt his change, Conjesero landed. Unfortunately, he had never learned the secret of transforming himself from one non-human form to another. First, he had to take the human form of Juan Antonio Bojorquez.

With ease, he manifested to his human form. When he finished, he took slow deep breaths. He walked down the alley to make sure there were no other prying eyes, then stretched his neck and shoulders. When he first started transforming, he dreaded the process. The pain had been nearly intolerable. Now he thrived on the pain. It was a glorious thing.

He cleared his mind from distraction. The change into a non-human form took intense concentration and effort. A lesser man would die trying it. He removed all of his rage and loathing until his mind was a blank slate. He forgot about the daily tribulations of life. He cleared his new adversary from his mind and focused on

becoming—not what he was, but what he was about to be.

The roar of traffic remained in the background. The air had the unmistakable metallic scent of blood. A strong breeze blew his scraggily hair. In his mind, there was only calm and serenity. He closed his eyes, visualizing what he would become.

Thick, coarse, dark brown hair grew on his arms, legs, chest, face, neck, head, and feet. It felt as if someone was tearing at his body with sandpaper. His skin felt raw. A tingling sensation developed as hair covered his entire torso.

He gritted his teeth. The next phase would be exceptionally painful. His bones extended and elongated, as his body began to vibrate. It was as if heavy jolts of electricity coursed through his body. Bones crunched and grinded as they became the appropriate length. Despite the horrible pain, he did not so much as wince. The metatarsals in his feet expanded. His femur and tibia expanded. All the while he maintained his concentration.

After his bone stopped expanding, the shape of his face changed. His nose enlarged and his cheeks compressed. He breathed hard and grunted. The sensation was the equivalent of someone putting a blowtorch to his face. His jaw protruded and his teeth became narrow and jagged. In the end, his face took the shape of a wolf. He was no longer human, but a creation entirely of his making. Conjesero gave a slight howl. The hard part was over, and now came the payoff.

The scent of blood became stronger now that he his senses intensified. He could see further and sharper than in his human form. Those noises that had been background, echoed sharply in his ears. This was so much better than being human. Sometimes he wondered why he bothered turning back.

Normally, he killed randomly out of blood lust. Today would be different. The reporter, Matt Szatko, had been getting too close to the truth and paid dearly for it. It was only a matter of time before Detective Russell came after him. Today, he would send Russell a message he would never forget.

Rita loathed the man she had just arrested. He had been in and out of jail since his teens on burglary, drug possession with intent to distribute, driving while intoxicated, and assault and battery charges. If she could, she would have gladly put a few bullets into the man's skull.

Mark Hames had gone off the deep end this time, killing his wife of four months. He had beaten the woman throughout their seven-year relationship. She married the bastard anyway, and according to police records, the beatings intensified and became more numerous after they were married. Two weeks ago, she had put a restraining order against him, not that it made any difference. Three days ago, after breaking into the apartment they once shared. When the police came to investigate the disturbance, she was dead. He battered her until she was unrecognizable. Hopefully, the son of a bitch would rot in jail for a long, long time.

Rita and her partner had apprehended Hames as he attempted to flee the country, arresting him earlier this afternoon near the Oregon border.

After she put Mark Hames into his cell, Rita heard a crashing sound coming from the floor above her. "What the hell was that?"

The guard on duty shook his head. "No idea, but that didn't sound good. Let me call upstairs." He called someone on his radio. "Nothing but static." He continued calling, then turned toward Rita. "Seems like nobody's answering. I'll check it out."

"Let me know if you need help," Rita said as he ascended the stairwell to the second floor of the prison.

Rita looked at her watch and sighed. It was six thirty in the evening. It had been a long week. While on the road back, she called her husband to let him know she would be late again tonight. She had barely seen her family over the last month. At least they would have the entire weekend together.

As she walked down the hallway, another loud noise came from

above her. As she passed by a cell, someone gasped.

“It’s you.”

The voice sounded familiar. Rita turned and rolled her eyes at the sight of Ray Holman.

“Do you know how many times I have thought about you?” Ray said. “While I’ve been unfairly sitting in this jail cell, I have never stopped thinking about you. I’ve thought about what could have been, what should have been.”

Rita moved closer to Holman’s cell. “Do you know what I’ve been thinking of?”

“No,” Ray replied.

Rita stepped closer. “You see, I’ve been thinking that if I was only a little quicker that night Detective Russell arrested you, I could have blown your fucking head off.” She smiled.

Ray frowned. “You don’t mean that.”

“Listen, Ray, I would call you a maggot, but that wouldn’t be fair to those little insects that crawl all over rotting carcasses. They’re better than you.” She started to walk away.

“Wait,” Ray called. “I know you don’t mean that. Come back here.”

She was about to sling some more insults when she heard a scream followed by shots being fired coming from upstairs.

Rita went wide-eyed when a monstrous figure walked down the steps. “No fucking way.” It was a...wolf man. It walked in an upright position on two feet. It’s hulking frame was accentuated by massive shoulders, thick arms and chest, and a large snout.

A prison guard rushed down the stairs after the wolf-man. Streaks of blood ran down his face. He lunged at the beast and wrapped his arms around it. It lifted the guard like a doll and threw him to the floor. It stepped on the man’s chest and caved in his chest cavity. The man choked on his own blood. The beast then kicked him to the side like he was a plaything and kept going forward.

The prisoners cowered back in their cells.

The guard on duty attempted to escape the back way, but the

wolf man went into a crouched position and leaped at him. It cleared a distance of ten yards and pounced on the man. Unable to react in time to stop its razor sharp fangs from piercing the back of his neck, he uttered a low moaning wail before collapsing to the floor.

Rita's heart began to thump. She stood frozen in terror. She had stood tall in some tough spots, but what could she do against this thing? Kevin had been right all along. She wished she had taken him seriously.

Rita pulled out her gun. "Stay right there!" She pointed the gun at the beast, her hand shaking badly.

Finished with mauling the guard, the wolf man raised its head, a chunk of flesh hanging from its mouth, blood dripping onto the floor. It had thick, coarse fur that covered its body. Its fur was matted with blood.

She wanted to cower and hide. This beast had slaughtered those guards like they were insects. What chance did she have against it? Despite that, she stood her ground. She had to try to stop this creature.

Rita moved toward the beast. When she spoke, her voice trembled. "I know who you are. You're Conjesero. You're responsible for the recent rash of murders."

It got up from its crouched position and stalked toward her.

Rita passed Holman's cell.

Holman shrieked at the sight of the creature.

The wolf-man extended a paw toward Rita.

"Stand back or I'll shoot you!" Rita could only hope this creature didn't sense her fear.

It shook its fur-covered head and continued stalking.

"I said back away." Rita squeezed the trigger of her Glock. The beast barely flinched as the bullet tore into its chest. It reached in, pulled the bullet out, and tossed it to the floor.

Rita cursed in Italian. She fired two more shots at it. Both connected, but only causing it to momentarily stop advancing.

This time she unloaded all of the bullets in her gun, dropping the

creature. She sighed, thinking she had finally done some damage, but it got back to its feet.

With no more bullets left, Rita scrambled down the hallway in an attempt to buy time. She turned the corner at the end of the corridor and hid behind a pillar near the stairwell leading to the main floor. Chaos and confusion reigned in the prison. After pulling out a clip of bullets, she reloaded her gun. Before she could finish, the creature was back. She tried to run, but it clawed her right calf, tearing deeply into her skin. She fell to floor, yelping in pain. Twirling, she shoved the rest of the clip into the gun. A huge backhanded fist from the creature knocked her senselessly. Blood dripped from her mouth and nose. She pointed the gun in its direction and fired a few shots, all of which missed. Her vision was blurry and she could not pinpoint the wolf-man's location, seeing three of it.

Rita tried to stand, but instead stumbled backwards. She fired and clipped him in the shoulder. The beast didn't react. It jumped on Rita and slammed her to the floor. The world around her was a blurred vision. Barely awake, she felt Conjesero squeeze her throat, and then she felt no more.

Conjesero got up with and howled, blood slithering down his mouth and neck. It tasted like sweet nectar. Killing this cop was merely a prelude to the main event. He was perplexed that she knew his identity, but she took that knowledge to her grave.

He felt so alive, more than a normal mortal could ever dream of being. His senses were so acute that he could make out a whisper from two of the prisoners in the jail. The twelve people he had killed thus far in the prison were a bonus. The one he came for was still here.

On all fours, Conjesero moved back into the main corridor. He then walked on two feet until he reached his target, the Hail Mary Rapist.

The rapist stood in front of the bars of his jail cell, his eyes

narrowed. “What are you?”

Conjesero howled.

The rapist covered his ears and backed away. He cowered at the rear of the cell. “Please go away.”

Conjesero grabbed two of the bars with his hands. With inhuman strength, he pulled them apart.

The Hail Mary Rapist shook his head, his eyes wide.

Slowly, the bars bent outward as the muscles of his powerful torso shook with exertion. What had been a three-inch separation between bars was now an eight-inch separation. Conjesero howled once again until the bars snapped.

The rapist moved as far back as he could, but there was nowhere to run. The opening was still too narrow, so he made it even larger, this time using both hands to grab a bar, and ripped it from its weld. He ripped out another bar, creating a gap large enough to fit through.

“Please help me!” The rapist bolted for the opening of the jail cell. Conjesero ended his ill-fated plan by extending his arm and clotheslining him. The rapist’s head snapped back. His feet lifted off the ground, and he fell on his back with a thud.

Conjesero lifted him off the floor and hurled him against the solid wall of the cell. He then grabbed one of the bars he had ripped out, and wrapped it around the man’s neck. The rapist’s face turned purple. Conjesero felt supreme power as he continued to constrict him until the rapist’s body became limp.

Conjesero released the bar, and the rapist’s body dropped to the floor. He exited the jail cell toward the dead body of a prison guard he killed. He removed the man’s clothing, and brought them to a bathroom at the end of the hallway. Within minutes, Juan Antonio Bojorquez emerged from the bathroom, dressed as a uniformed guard, and walked out of the chaotic prison.

Chapter XXXV

Kevin waited outside of Bojorquez's apartment. After arriving shortly after one in the afternoon, he had parked his car at the far end of Federal Street with a clear view of the street. His plan was to ambush Bojorquez after the man entered the apartment and finish him off there.

As day turned into evening, he became restless. What would a mass murdering, shape changer be doing at this time anyway? Probably creating havoc elsewhere, which meant Kevin was wasting his time waiting near his apartment.

At six forty-seven, Kevin received a frantic call on the radio from a dispatcher. There had been a massacre at the prison where they were holding Holman. At least two officers were down. Kevin was specifically called in on the radio.

"Holy shit," Kevin muttered.

He put up a flashing light on the roof of his car and floored the accelerator. He drove through heavy traffic, cutting traffic lights and driving on the side of the road when necessary, all the while listening to the back and forth conversation on the radio.

The more he heard, the more he was convinced it was Conjesero's doing. But why was Conjesero at the prison?

It took twenty minutes to reach the prison. Not bothering to park his car, he cut the ignition, jumped out, and made a dash for the entrance with his gun in hand.

Kevin gasped once inside. The smell of blood was thick. Motionless people were on the floor dying or dead. One man's leg was dismembered. It was like a slaughterhouse. He stepped past EMT's assisting the wounded. Only Conjesero could have created this carnage.

He searched the area, looking for Juan Antonio Bojorquez. Instead he found the large, looming figure of Captain Lawyer Bishop.

Tears streaked down his cheek. He had never seen Bishop cry before, didn't think the man was capable of it. Kevin put his gun back into its holster and ran towards him. Bishop shook his head. Several people were in the process of putting a body into a bag. When Kevin saw who it was, he shoved the people aside.

"Oh my God. Oh my God!" He reached out and held the battered and bloody body of Rita Tedesco close to him, getting her blood all over his clothes. "No!" The EMT's backed away from him. He gently let her body down and held her hand. He fought back tears. "Oh, Rita, how could this happen?"

Bishop pulled Kevin away. Blood covered Kevin's hands, face and shirt.

"What...What happened?" Kevin asked.

Bishop shook his head. "I'm not sure yet. From what I've gathered, some sort of wolf or something was set loose and did all of this damage. I think it's the same thing you've been investigating. That's why I told them to call you over here."

"That son of a bitch." Kevin buried his face in his hands.

"Rita was in the wrong place at the wrong time. She was here seeing a murder suspect being put behind bars, and I think she got in its way."

"Has Jim been notified?"

"Not yet. I'm going to call him."

Kevin's heart shattered, thinking about how Rita's husband and children would react to this news. He never had the misfortune of having to notify the family of a fellow officer who had been killed in the line of duty, and hoped he never would.

"Now what?" Kevin asked.

Bishop walked away and Kevin followed. "We're cops. We're going to do our jobs. Find out what happened here."

They spent the next three hours interrogating anyone who had been at the prison during the massacre. They started at the upper level, speaking to prison guards and staff members.

The stories varied slightly. Some said a wolf had done this.

Others said it couldn't be a wolf since it stood like a person. Their descriptions matched Paul's attacker.

When they finished upstairs, they went to the lower level. They went into the cells and interviewed the prisoners. Surprisingly, they were cooperative. Kevin felt like he had been punched in the gut after talking to the inmates. His plan was to ambush Bojorquez and shoot him down. By the accounts of the eyewitnesses, Conjesero had been shot nearly a dozen times. How the hell was he going to stop Conjesero now?

Three prisoners witnessed the wolf-man ripping off steel bars in order to get into Ray Holman's cell. Bishop looked stunned when he heard this account, but Kevin was not.

Before they wrapped up the investigation, they saw the naked corpse of a prison guard. Bishop's brows furrowed. As they left the cell he asked, "Why in the world would the attacker take the man's clothes off?"

"So he could get away unrecognized," Kevin replied.

Bishop grabbed his arm. "You've been holding out on me, haven't you?"

"Yeah, I have."

Bishop glared at him. "Why?"

"Because if I had told you what I know, you would never have believed me."

They spoke to the warden. He told them the total number dead was twelve including Rita and another police officer. Seven prison guards and two staff members had been killed, and one very famous prisoner was now dead.

Bishop ushered Kevin into a nearby office, and closed the door. "Alright, Kevin, talk to me. No bullshit now. What's going on here?"

"When I spoke with you last week and told you we were dealing with something completely out of the ordinary, something out of this world, you dismissed it. Well, now what do you think?"

"Never mind what I think. Tell me what you know. All of it."

Kevin took a deep breath, feeling empty inside. “I know who’s responsible for this. His name is Juan Antonio Bojorquez. He is the janitor at Farrell Elementary School. But he’s a hell of a lot more than that. He started as a voodoo priest in Haiti many years back. There’s no telling when he first started, but it’s been much longer than the normal human lifespan. He lived in Mexico for years and killed many people. The authorities did nothing because they had no way of dealing with him. About six years ago, he crossed the border and entered the US and his been killing people ever since. My plan was to kill him tonight until this happened.”

“How do you know all of this?”

“I’ve been investigating a trail of murders that fit this pattern. I also have an eyewitness that saw him kill seven Farrell students and then transform back into a person, as well as physical evidence to back it up.”

“So that’s why he took that guard’s clothes? Because he turned himself back into a person?”

“Exactly.”

“This is batshit crazy.”

“What do we do now?” Kevin raised his voice. It felt like his sanity was cracking. “Rita shot him repeatedly, and that did nothing. Absolutely nothing. If he can’t be stopped by bullets, then what are we going to do?”

“The Feds will be taking over the case in the next day or so. It will be their problem.”

Kevin laughed. “What are they going to do? Conjesero will knock them down like bowling pins. They can’t stop him. They won’t even believe that such a thing exists. He’ll destroy them just like he did Rita.”

“Well then what do we do? We can’t let him kill people whenever he feels like.”

Kevin’s voice faltered. “I don’t know. I have to go.”

Kevin went to the police station, not feeling like going home yet. He still had to sort through things and figure out his next move.

A red message light blinked on his phone at his desk. He hoped it was Wendy, concerned that she hadn't heard from him. He longed to be in her arms tonight.

He checked his message. On it was a man with a creepy Mexican accent. "Hey, Gringo. It's me. You know who. Hey, today was just a message. You want no part of me, Gringo. You think you can arrest me like you did that rapist? I will crush you like a fly." A deep laugh followed. "What are you going to do now? You come after me, and I'll destroy you, but not after I have more fun like today. Come after me, Gringo. If you dare."

Kevin slammed the phone on the receiver and screamed.

Chapter XXXVI

After leaving the police station, Kevin drove to Wendy's house. Thankfully she was still awake. He couldn't bear being alone. Tears streamed from her eyes as he told her everything. Surprisingly, he maintained his composure. After he finished, they fell asleep in each other's arms.

The following morning, Kevin dialed Captain Bishop's cell while Wendy made pancakes. Kevin was famished, having gone nearly a full day without eating.

"Hey, Kevin." Bishop's voice sounded rough.

"You don't sound so good," Kevin said.

Bishop cleared his throat. "I was up all night. I think I'm coming down with something."

"Do you know anything about the funeral arrangements?"

"I spoke with Rita's sister this morning. They haven't made arrangements yet. Look, there's going to be a news briefing later on today about the prison incident."

Kevin sighed. "I was flipping around the television this morning. They don't seem to have the full story yet, only that it was a bloodbath with major casualties. It's already the biggest news story in the country."

"I spoke with the commissioner just before you called. The Feds are officially taking over the case. You're going to have to turn over what you have to them in the next couple days. You'll be functioning as a consultant following their lead. They still need your input, but you won't be calling the shots."

Kevin thought he would be furious to get this news, but he was almost relieved.

After he finished talking to Bishop, he and Wendy ate breakfast. He had a full belly after eating a large stack of pancakes.

Wendy massaged his shoulders. "What you need to do is relax and recharge your batteries. Look, I have the day off. Let's go

somewhere. Forget about all this, even if it's just for a few hours. This is killing you.”

Kevin looked up at her. Wendy had the face of an angel. He closed his eyes. “Sure. Let's do it.”

Wendy dragged him out of her apartment. He didn't even ask where they were going. First they went to Coit Tower and checked out great views of the Golden Gate Bridge, and then they spent the rest of the day on Fisherman's Wharf acting like tourists.

No matter how much Wendy tried to help him forget his problems, he couldn't. He kept thinking about Rita's bloody corpse.

He had to come up with a plan to stop Conjesero. Hoping to find some inspiration, he paid Paul a visit at his condo in San Mateo.

They sat on his deck drinking Coronas.

“So what I want to know is what are you going to do to stop this Conjesero? I'm scared out of my mind to go up against it again, but I'll do whatever I can to help.

“No offense, Paul, but what the hell are you going to do to help?” Kevin lowered his head. “Sorry. I didn't mean it like that. It doesn't matter. It won't be my case for much longer.”

“You gotta be kidding me. You can't let that happen. You have to do something before then?”

“And what would you suggest? Gunshots had the same effect on it as a mosquito bite.”

“So you're just going to do nothing? You're going to let that thing go on killing?” Paul got in Kevin's face. “Bullshit. You never laid down before and you're not going to start now. I know you better than you know yourself, and you're going to try to stop that thing if it fucking kills you.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence, but I'm out of options.”

As he left the condo, Kevin had never felt more depressed. He looked at his watch. It was still early. He had one more stop to make. He wanted to stop and see the Marquez family to thank them

for their help.

When he pulled onto their street and knocked at the door, he was glad to see that everybody was home. This way he could speak to them all at once.

Rosa Marquez answered the door. “It was Conjesero that killed the rapist and those other people on Friday, wasn’t it?” Apparently she too had started to believe.

Kevin nodded.

“Come inside,” she said. “We are about to eat dinner. You will stay and join us.”

“Thanks. That sounds great.”

“I will get Manuel and his grandfather.”

Manny greeted him first. “Hey, Detective Russell. How are you? Maybe I shouldn’t ask. Conjesero’s all over the news except nobody realizes it. This is so messed up. I can’t believe how he can just kill people like that. Doesn’t he have any sort of conscience or anything? I mean, just because you have the power to crush people, it doesn’t mean you should.”

“It’s happened throughout history,” Kevin said. “Look at people like Hitler. He put people in concentration camps and slaughtered them. Power can bring out the worst in people.”

Pedro Marquez came in from the outside and shook Kevin’s hand.

The family members gathered around the dining room table, and Rosa began to serve them.

Kevin said, “I was there on Friday night at the prison. It was a disaster. He killed a good friend of mine.” Kevin’s voice started to falter. “Her name was Rita Tedesco. She was a good cop and an even better person. She shot Conjesero repeatedly, but it had no effect on him. I’ve been told that some FBI agents will be taking over the case imminently. I just wanted to thank you guys for sticking your necks out and helping me. I wish this could have ended better.”

Pedro’s face tightened. “No.”

“What do you mean no?” Kevin asked.

“I am sorry, but you cannot do that,” Pedro answered. “Do not make same mistake I make when I was younger. You remember when I say to you that I wanted to go back and try stop Conjesero, but I give up when nobody help. How many people die, huh? How many people die because no one did nothing? Now you do the same thing. No. You cannot do that. It is time to stop Conjesero. We must stop him.”

“Mr. Marquez, with all due respect, what can we possibly do? I wish that I could do something, believe me. If there was a way to kill that son of a bitch, I would try it. Nobody wants him dead more than I do.”

“But there is way,” Pedro said. “You remember when I say that he in Dominican Republic and law people and other priests drove him away? How do you think they do that? If he so powerful, then why he not kill them all.”

Kevin narrowed his eyes. “All right, let’s say something can be done. How are we going to find out in, let’s say, the next two days, because that’s about all the time I have to make something happen.”

“We go to Mexico and find Carlos Guerreuro. If Conjesero can be stopped, this man know. Then we come back and you kill him.”

“The gangster?” Kevin asked.

Pedro nodded.

“You make it sound so simple. How am I going to find Carlos Guerreuro?”

Pedro said. “I go with you.”

“And I’ll go with you,” Manny said. “My grandfather and I know the area and the language better than you do. We’ll help you find this guy.”

Kevin looked at the fierce determination on Pedro’s and Manny’s faces. They had the kind of commitment needed to see this thing through, the kind of dedication he had been lacking since the prison massacre. If they were willing to risk their lives, then he was also.

Rosa Marquez tried to protest her son's involvement, but Manny wouldn't hear any of it.

“Okay. Let's do it. I have a funeral early tomorrow morning for my friend. As soon as it's done, we'll drive down. In the meantime, I don't want Alex to going back to school.” For better or worse, it would be up to them to stop this monster.

Chapter XXXVII

After Rita's funeral, Kevin said goodbye to Wendy. He made the trip to Tijuana in five hours, keeping the odometer of his Pathfinder at breakneck speed. Neither Manny nor Pedro Marquez protested.

On the way, Pedro used Kevin's cell phone to call people connected with Carlos Guerreuro.

As he was calling, Manny said, "My grandfather tells me that Guerreuro has his pulse on just about everything happening in Mexico. He's tied to the Cartels. He got his hands in drugs, stolen merchandise, extortion, you name it.

"When he was in Mexico, a man named Angel Garcia was once employed by Guerreuro. Grandpa said that's one of Conjesero's aliases."

Kevin shook his head. "How does he know all this?"

Manny shrugged. "He talks to a lot of people. The old man has connections."

After an hour on the phone, Pedro said, "Mr. Guerreuro will see us. I speak to Mr. Guerrero's assistant. We meet woman in leather store. She take us to see the boss."

It was approaching five in the evening when they crossed the Mexican border. With Pedro guiding them, they navigated through the city. Kevin parked the car on the street in front of the store.

As soon as they entered, the smell of fresh leather goods overwhelmed Kevin. The store had jackets, purses, briefcases, gloves, and backpacks on sale. Customers haggled over prices. A salesman yelled at an American couple saying that this was the lowest price they were going to find in Tijuana, and his products were guaranteed genuine leather.

Pedro went up to an older woman behind the cash register. Manny translated for Kevin. "Are you Carmela?"

"Why do you want to know?"

“I’m looking for the wolf,” Pedro asked.

“Follow me.”

Pedro tailed her while Manny and Kevin remained close behind. They walked out of the shop and into the crowded Tijuana streets. They couldn’t move far without somebody approaching them to sell something. They all had the best goods at the best prices.

They had to walk quickly to keep up with Carmela. She was a plump woman in her mid-fifties, but was spry for her size. She led them to a cigar store. Inside a wide variety of cigars were on display. The back rooms had walk-in humidors with finer cigars.

Carmela led them through a back room. She opened a door that led to a storage area. Inside was a boy, no older than twelve.

Manny translated as Carmela said, “This is Roberto. He will lead you to your destination.”

“Apparently it’s not easy to see Mr. Guerreuro,” Kevin said.

Kevin gave the woman a ten-dollar bill for her trouble, and they followed Roberto, who wound his way through the streets like a cat.

As they walked, Roberto edged closer to Kevin. “Senõr, anything you want, I get you. You want food, alcohol, maybe you want woman. Anything, I get you.”

Kevin smiled. “Thanks. Just find us Senõr Guerreuro, and that will be enough.”

“No problem, man. I’m your guy. I take care of you.”

They followed their young guide to a pharmacy

Roberto mumbled something to the man working behind the counter. The man then got on the phone and dialed. Kevin folded his arms and waited impatiently.

The man spoke softly on the phone before disconnecting. “You wait here, few minutes only.”

Roberto smiled. “I am finished here, Senõr. I hope your journey was a pleasant one.” Kevin reached into his wallet and gave the kid a ten-dollar bill.

“Thank you, sir.”

Five minutes later, a woman in high heels who looked like a

prostitute entered the pharmacy. The pharmacist smiled at Kevin. “You like?”

Kevin did not know how to answer this question. “She’s quite nice, I’m sure.”

“I get you good rate for her,” the pharmacist said.

Kevin shook his head and smiled. “No thanks.”

The man frowned. “Oh. Come inside. You can meet my sister.”

“Can you take us to see the Wolf?” Manny asked the prostitute.

She nodded, and they left.

As they exited, Manny shot Kevin a quizzical look. “What was that all about? Was he trying to pimp his sister?”

“I don’t even want to venture a guess,” Kevin replied. “Let’s just move on.”

When they got to the end of the street of an area that could be politely described as seedy, they stopped at a light. A man with a scar on his chin approached the prostitute that was leading them to Guerrero. He twisted her arm and yelled at her. Must be an unsatisfied customer. She cried out.

Kevin grabbed the man by his shirt collar, and yanked him off her. “Leave her alone.”

The man yelled something in Spanish. He came forward and took a swing at Kevin. Kevin dodged the punch and landed a short hook to the man’s ribs, causing him to wince. He grabbed the man’s left arm and brought it behind his back. Kevin spun around and put his arm around the man’s windpipe, choking him. He then kicked the man’s left leg behind his knee, and he fell to the ground, gasping for breath.

Kevin whispered in the man’s ear. “Get the hell out of here before you get hurt.”

The man ran away after Kevin let go of him, cursing as he left.

The prostitute kissed Kevin on the cheek. “Gracias.”

“We need to move.” Kevin looked at his watch. It was getting late. He was tired of using these couriers to get to Guerrero.

The prostitute led them to a bar. Inside, the patrons were watching a soccer game on television. Others sat at tables, playing cards. There was a large open area that held a dance floor, although no one was dancing. Shady characters lined the bar. Kevin guessed there was more activity involved in this place than just serving food and drink.

The prostitute went to the bar and spoke to the bartender, who quickly exited. A minute later the bartender came back followed by a man in a light blue shirt and a red tie. His dark black hair was combed straight back.

“I am Jesus. You must be Senõr Marquez. We spoke earlier on the phone.”

The two men shook hands. Pedro then introduced Kevin and Manny.

“Please come with me,” Jesus said.

They followed Jesus out of the bar to a back area. He led them to a table. Manny translated for Kevin. “Please sit. Judging by what I have seen on CNN, I can imagine the nature of your visit. You inquired about a man called Angel Garcia. I imagine that you have figured out the true nature of this man. Mr. Garcia was a most valuable employee of Mr. Guerrero. He could do things others could not. What specifically do you want from my boss?”

Pedro answered, “Mr. Russell is a homicide detective in San Francisco. We hope to stop Conjesero, the man you know as Angel Garcia, once and for all.”

“And why should Mr. Guerreuro help your friend out?”

“If your boss has any decency, he will help us,” Pedro replied.

Jesus laughed. “If you are coming for decency, then you have come to the wrong place, but I suppose Mr. Guerrero can spare some of his valuable time to see you. Please follow me.”

They went up a set of stairs. The room had a large stage where three young women danced. The waitresses were topless, and the women on the stage wore even less.

“Wow,” Manny said.

“Stay focused, kid,” Kevin said

Manny nodded. “Right.”

Jesus led them to a table where a large man sat. Smoke billowed around him from his cigar. He wore a cowboy hat. Jesus approached him and spoke briefly. He then motioned to the three to pull up chairs and sit at the table. “This is Carlos Guerrero.”

They did as instructed.

Guerrero turned to acknowledge them. “Lovely ladies. Which would you like?”

Kevin said, “We’re not interested in that sort of entertainment. We have come here for information.”

Guerrero said, “In time. Are you gentlemen hungry?”

Kevin nodded. They had not stopped for food on the way from San Francisco. It was close to seven in the evening, and none of them had eaten since the morning.

Guerrero signaled one of the topless waitresses over to them and told her to bring food for his guests.

Kevin faced Guerrero. “We have been told you’re familiar with a man that used to be known as Angel Garcia?”

“Indeed,” Guerrero responded. “Causing some trouble lately, has he?”

“He’s killed dozens of people over the past two weeks alone,” Kevin said.

“You tell me nothing I don’t already know.”

“Mr. Guerrero, I need your help to stop him,” Kevin said.

“You need much more than my help,” Guerrero said.

Trays of food and a round of Coronas arrived at the table. Guerrero helped himself to enchiladas and tamales. “You can’t stop Conjesero, my friends. I have seen what he can do. He did valuable work for me once upon a time.”

“What can you tell us about him?” Kevin asked. “How did you meet him?”

“In this country I know everyone. Nothing happens without my knowledge. So I heard of this practitioner of voodoo who had great

power. I made it my business to know this man. He helped me by taking care of unfavorable business partners, and I insured him the Federales would lay off him. It was a good relationship.”

Kevin hated that he had to deal with this slime, but at this point he would cut a deal with Satan to stop Conjesero. “What happened to end this relationship?”

“Angel Garcia became out of control. He crossed the line when he killed school children. I suggested we part ways. He went north. I stayed here.”

Kevin frowned. “And he agreed to this?”

“Of course he did. I can be a worthy adversary, even to one as powerful as Conjesero. I know his secrets. I know his weaknesses.”

Kevin studied the man, trying to decipher if he spoke the truth.

“How come he has all of this power, yet he doesn’t rob people for all of their money?” Manny asked. “I mean he could rob a bank if he wanted to. He could be rich beyond belief.”

Guerrero smiled. “Ahh, that was the beauty of working with Angel Garcia. He had long since lost interest in wealth and riches. He could do all of those things, my young friend, but he had no interest in them. He lacked greed for the things I wanted. He was merely interested in the killing. It fulfills his innermost desires. It is the only thing he truly craves. I think it gave him more energy and power, because when he left my employ he was far stronger than when he started. I think he continues to get stronger, and after seeing what he has done lately, I pity you if you try to stop him.”

Kevin asked, “You said earlier that you knew of Conjesero’s weaknesses. What are they?”

Guerrero took a few nachos and dipped them into a bowl of salsa. When he finished swallowing, he replied, “And why should I tell you? Angel Garcia made me lots of money. I have no ill will toward him. Those he kills are not in my country. What have you done for me?”

Pedro said, “Senor Guerrero, please have some decency. This man has killed so many and will continue if we do not stop him.”

The gangster shrugged and continued to eat.

This line of reasoning was getting them nowhere. Kevin had to get down to serious negotiating. “Listen, Angel Garcia, who now goes by the name of Juan Antonio Bojorquez, can no longer help you. He won’t be returning to Mexico so he has no value to you anymore. Whatever business relationship you had with him in the past is over. I, on the other hand, am a homicide detective for the San Francisco Police Department.” Kevin flashed him his badge. “If you help me out, and I eliminate him, then I will be in your debt. Let’s be practical. Having a San Francisco homicide detective in your debt is very valuable to a man such as yourself. I can make problems north of the border go away. I can make sure certain infractions go away. I can make it so that rivals face heavy legal problems. I have law enforcement connections in both the US and Mexico. I can make things happen for you.”

Manny stared at Kevin, dismay etched on his face.

Kevin leaned into Manny. “Sometimes you have to look out for the greater good. Saving countless lives is worth whatever unfortunate deed I’ll have to do on his behalf.”

“And how do I know you will keep your end of the bargain?” Guerrero asked.

“I can only give you my word. I solemnly promise that I will come through for you.”

“I want more.” Guerrero pointed at Manny. “You let me down, and the kid dies.”

Pedro erupted with protests.

Kevin raised his hands and stared at Pedro and Manny. “You need not worry. I will do whatever he asks of me. Whatever.”

Guerrero continued eating and tilted his head. He turned to Kevin and smiled. “I will accept your offer.”

“Fair enough.”

“Good,” Guerrero said. “I have a business rival north of the border that I want eliminated off the face of the Earth, and you are just the man for the job.”

Manny glared at the gangster. “You can’t make him do that.”

“I just did. Don’t worry, my young friend. Unlike me, he is a very bad man.”

Kevin stared hard into Guerrero’s eyes. “Consider it done. Now tell me what I need to know.”

Guerrero cleared his throat. “Your man has one point of weakness. When he is Conjesero, nothing can harm him. But when he is in his normal human form, he is as mortal as you or I. He can be killed when he is a man. Of course, you must attack him while he is in this state.” Guerrero gave a roaring laugh. “It all won’t matter anyway. If you try to go against Conjesero, you will wind up dead, my friends. And if you do manage to pull off this miracle, we will settle up later.”

Kevin just made a deal with the devil and he didn’t regret it.

Chapter XXXVIII

After Carlos Guerrero's revelation, they listened to him boast for another couple hours. He told numerous torrid stories about the employee he used to know as Angel Garcia.

One tale Kevin found particularly chilling was when one of Guerrero's rival gangsters attempted to put a hit on Angel Garcia. The assassin had stalked Garcia for days. One night, the hitman waited patiently in his vehicle as Garcia went into a movie theater. His plan, a simple one, was to take Garcia out after the film was over. Twenty minutes after he saw Garcia walk into the theater, the assassin had to relieve himself. He walked to a tavern across the street, figuring he had plenty of time before the movie finished. After exiting the car, he found hovering in the air an incredibly large raven, looking straight at him.

The man stepped forward, but the bird blocked his path. He motioned with his arms for it to fly away, but it would not oblige. When he tried to strike it, the bird revealed a massive set of sharp teeth, like that of a tiger. The man reached for his gun, but before he could get it, the bird landed on his neck and bit his face. By the time it was finished, the assassin's face was barely recognizable.

Over the next few weeks, one by one, every member of the gangster's family who hired this assassin died, each death more horrific than the previous one. Conjesero slaughtered the man's parents, his three children, his wife, his mistress, and several cousins. When the gangster could no longer take it, he came to Carlos Guerrero and pleaded for his life. With the man on his hands and knees, sobbing like a child, Guerrero brought in Angel Garcia and asked what he should do with him.

Garcia handed the gangster the same gun the hitman had used when he attempted to kill him. "I will give you a two hour start. If at the end of this time tomorrow you have still eluded me, I will no longer pursue you."

Guerrero nodded. “A fair proposal.”

The following day Angel Garcia dropped off a bag at his boss’s residence containing the man’s severed head.

After finishing the story, Carlos Guerrero asked, “Do you still think it is a wise idea to pursue Conjesero?”

Kevin listened closely to these stories, trying to find some vulnerability in his foe, but Conjesero had more than just the ability to change into frightening creatures. He had unnatural instincts. Kevin wasn’t sure if he was clairvoyant, telekinetic or extremely perceptive. The bottom line was that he would only have one chance at killing Conjesero. If he did not succeed, then Conjesero would hunt him down, just as he did the gangster who ordered a contract on him.

When Guerrero finished his stories, he said, “You have provided me with much amusement. Please stay as my guests at one of my hotels.”

Kevin looked at his watch. It was near midnight, so he accepted the offer.

The following morning, they took a cab to Kevin’s Pathfinder. Kevin breathed a sigh of relief when he found his car still intact. They got in the car and crossed the border without delay after Kevin flashed his badge to the customs officials.

The drive to San Francisco took longer than he would have liked, the morning rush hour traffic in Los Angeles slowing them. During the trip, they spoke at length of their conversation with Carlos Guerrero.

“It’s going to take a quick strike to get Conjesero,” Kevin said.

Manny and Pedro threw out ideas. Kevin listened, but he had already formulated a plan.

When they got past the rush hour traffic, Kevin made up time by driving well over the speed limit. When they passed Bakersfield, Kevin called Paul Richardson and gave him a quick recap of his activities from the past two days.

“This is some bad business you’re involved with,” Paul said. “I guess I was right.”

“About what?” Kevin asked.

“I told you that you weren’t done with this investigation. It’s not in you to quit.”

Kevin grinned. “I guess you were right.”

“It feels like I’m reliving this nightmare, Kev. It won’t go away.”

“Maybe it will after I kill the son of a bitch. Look, I have a plan. Meet me at my house at 4PM.”

After talking to Paul, Kevin handed Manny his Android. “Open up my address book.”

“Okay. I’m in,” Manny said.

“Get me Wendy Davis’s pager number, and page her with my cell number.”

Less than a minute later, Manny did as requested.

As he waited for Wendy to return his call, he asked, “Manny, can you skip class tomorrow?”

“I have a Multi-Variate Calculus exam. I’m not sure the professor will let me retake it, but if something’s going down, you know I’m in.”

“I’m going to need your help. When this is all over, I’ll talk to your professor and convince him to let you retake it.”

Manny shrugged. “If I can do something to help you get Conjesero, that’s all that matters.”

“Good.”

Five minutes later, his phone rang. It was Wendy.

“Hey, what’s going on? I tried calling you after the funeral.”

“My cell must not have coverage in Mexico,” Kevin said.

“I was worried. You seemed really down at the funeral.”

Kevin closed his eyes for a second. He wished he could be with her right now somewhere safe, in a world where Conjesero didn’t exist. “I’m better now. Much better.”

“Did you run into any trouble with that gangster you were meeting?”

Kevin could feel the concern in Wendy's voice. It occurred to him how different their lives were. She never had to deal with scum like Guerrero. "Actually, he was helpful. I think I can kill Conjesero. It's not going to be easy, and chances are I won't live past tomorrow, but I'm willing to bank everything on this one shot. I have no other option."

Wendy's voice trembled. "Kevin, you're scaring me."

"I'm not scared any more. Sometimes you have to take a stand, no matter what the risks. Can you meet me at my house at four? I'll tell you more about it."

"Sure. I'll get another resident to cover for me. I'm not sure if I can make it by four, but I'll try."

"It's all right," Kevin said. "Nothing's going to happen today anyway."

They reached San Francisco by four and Kevin's small Victorian house shortly thereafter. Paul had already arrived and let himself in with his key.

Paul had made a pitcher of lemonade and poured some for the weary travelers.

Kevin wanted Wendy here before he told everyone what he had in mind. He put on Fox News. Not surprisingly, the bloodbath at the prison and all of the related deaths that had occurred in recent weeks were leading the coverage. The same with CNN. There was also extensive coverage on the life and death of the Hail Mary Rapist. Ray Holman would have been happy to know that his fame had only increased after his death. He had developed a cult following. The station showed several Internet web sites devoted to that piece of human waste. Fortunately, there were no new reported Conjesero killings.

The doorbell to Kevin's house rang. Kevin's face lit up when he opened the door to find Wendy.

She greeted him with a kiss. "I'm sorry. I couldn't get out any earlier."

"I'm just glad you're here," Kevin said.

Now that everybody was present, Kevin addressed them all. “We met with a guy named Carlos Guerreuro out in Tijuana. He was a real scum bag, but he gave us valuable information. He told us the only way Conjesero could be hurt is in his human form when he is Juan Antonio Bojorquez.”

“How do you know this guy can be trusted?” Wendy asked.

Manny glanced at Kevin with worried eyes.

“We had to make a deal with the devil in order to get this information,” Kevin said. “I’m confident he told us the truth. Unfortunately, Conjesero’s even more dangerous than we thought.” He told Wendy and Paul the story about the hitman hired to kill Angel Garcia.

“Captain Bishop told me earlier that I am officially off this case other than to lend support as needed to the FBI agents who are now running it. The way I see it, I have one shot at this. If I don’t succeed, I won’t see Tuesday. Conjesero will hunt me down if he doesn’t kill me on the spot. I’ll be a dead man walking. Tomorrow, I’m going to Farrell Elementary and I’m going to evacuate the school. Then I’m going to hunt down Bojorquez and kill him before he has the opportunity to transform himself into something I can’t deal with.”

“I’m coming with you,” Manny said. “You’re going to need help getting all of the students out of there. I went to Farrell. I know the principal and the teachers. They’ll listen to me and cooperate.”

“I can help Manny out,” Wendy said. “If you want to get all of the students out, then you’ll have to do it quickly. I’m good with kids. They’ll follow me.”

“And you’re going to need somebody outside, just in case Bojorquez tries to get away,” Paul said. “We can bring two way radios. You can have one inside. I can be out in the car with one patrolling the area. If I see anything I’ll let you know.”

Kevin looked at them. “Are you guys sure you want to do this?”

Manny said, “You remember what Carlos said about the gangster who tried to have Angel Garcia killed. He killed every

member of his family before killing the guy himself. He'll know we're involved. If you don't succeed, he'll come after us, so we have no choice but to see this through."

"Manny's right," Wendy said.

Paul nodded.

Pedro said, "I would like to help out as well, Detective Russell."

"I want you to stay behind," Kevin said. "If I don't make it out, then you have to go to Captain Bishop and tell him everything you know about Conjesero. Hopefully, they'll listen and use this knowledge to stop him."

Pedro nodded.

They went over the plan until everybody knew what their role would be.

Chapter XXXIX

Kevin's hands trembled when he woke the following morning. Wrestling with a major headache, he took a couple of Tylenol. He had never felt this nervous before, fidgeting all night long and barely getting any sleep. In his mind, he ran through all of the things that could go wrong. This could wind up being a disaster, killing his career, but even worse, leading to the deaths of people he cared about.

Wendy had slept in Kevin's bed with him the previous evening, Paul took the spare bedroom, and Manny slept on the sofa in his living room. Pedro Marquez had gone to Rosa's home and stayed behind with his wife, grandson, and daughter-in-law.

Stirring from sleep, Wendy turned to him, speaking in a soft voice. "I need to know that things are going to be okay. I just want this whole thing to pass and for us to make it out alive. I want for us to live together and not worry about this monster."

He gently touched her face. "I wish I could tell you everything was going to turn out fine, that we'll make it through together. I wish I could tell you that we'll beat this thing, but the truth is I don't know if I can kill Conjesero. There is something I want you to know. Regardless of what happens, I want you to know that I love you. Your presence in my life is what's pulling me through."

Tears streamed down Wendy's cheeks. She hugged him. "I love you too." Their lips met. "You need to survive this. You just have to."

"With you to look forward to, that's all the motivation I need."

They said nothing for some time. No more words were necessary.

Finally, Kevin said. "Jump in the shower. I'll wake the others."

Downstairs Paul was already up, poking around the refrigerator. Manny was still asleep. Judging from Paul's bloodshot eyes, Kevin wasn't the only one who slept poorly last night.

“You’re food situation here is pitiful,” Paul said.

“I’ve barely been home the past three weeks.” Kevin clutched Paul’s arm. “Are you sure you can do this?”

Paul closed the refrigerator door. “I don’t know, but I’m going to try. At least I won’t be in the line of fire. Are you up for it?”

Kevin nodded.

Paul sighed. “You know, man, we’ve been through thick and thin ever since we were little kids. So it’s only appropriate that we do this together.”

Manny woke up and stretched, “What time is it?”

Kevin opened the living room curtains. “Time to get ready.”

Paul headed for the front door. “I’m going to go on a donut run to that bakery down the street. I’ll get coffee as well. We’re going to need to be alert.”

Manny got up from the sofa. “You know I thought I would be scared, but I’m feelin’ all right. Sometimes you have to make a stand regardless of the danger.”

Kevin put a hand on Manny’s shoulder. “I don’t doubt your bravery for a second, and I know you’re full of that machismo guys your age have, but I don’t want you to go anywhere near Conjesero. I want you to get the kids out of the school as planned. If you see Conjesero or even if you see him in his human form, promise me that you’ll get the hell out of there.”

Manny said nothing.

“Promise me.”

“Okay, man, you got it.”

“Do you have extra clothes?” Kevin asked.

“Yeah, in my bag,” Manny answered. “I even brought some text books with me. I actually did some studying last night.”

Twenty minutes later, Paul came back with coffee and donuts.

Kevin called Principal Fox at her home number.

“Do you have any news about the boys?” she asked.

Kevin took a deep breath. “I have reason to believe they’re all dead.”

Principal Fox gasped.

“Look I know this is going to be hard for you to hear, but I believe that the person who murdered them is an employee at your school.”

“Why would anyone who works here do such a thing?”

Because your janitor is a shape-shifting monster that’s evil to the core. “I realize this is difficult, but I have evidence to support this. Furthermore, I believe this man is a flight risk. Therefore, I need to make the arrest while school is in session without him suspecting anything.”

“Who could it possibly be?”

“I can’t answer that.”

Kevin finally got her to agree to his plan after some negotiation.

After having rehashed the plan and covering every contingency, they sat around Kevin’s kitchen table eating the last of the donuts. Kevin went upstairs and got a set of two-way radios that he and Paul would use.

Kevin drove his Pathfinder, while Paul, Manny, and Wendy followed in his Lexus. Paul drove with the radio turned off. He was in no mood for levity this morning.

Paul pulled into the school’s small parking lot. There were no available spaces, so he parked his car in the no parking zone. “We’re coming in,” Paul said into the radio.

“Good,” Kevin’s voice crackled through the receiver.

As Manny and Wendy left the car, Paul kissed Wendy on the cheek. “Be safe.”

They disappeared into the school building. Paul took a few short breaths. Feeling claustrophobic, he opened the window despite the morning chill. For a moment, he wanted to get out of the car. What if the janitor saw him? Surely he would recognize Paul from their previous encounter. His body a jumble of nerves, he called

Kevin on the radio. “Wendy and Manny just went into the building. The students are also arriving.”

“You okay?” Kevin asked.

“I don’t know.” Paul scanned the parking lot. “What if he spots me? He’ll know who I am.”

“Just put on that Niners cap and shades you keep in your car. He should already be inside.”

He put on the hat and glasses, and took a deep breath. Kevin would handle the situation. He always had in the past. He sat back in the bucket leather seats, waiting and watching as students entered the building.

Manny and Wendy went to the principal’s office. Manny introduced Principal Fox to Wendy. She shook Wendy’s hand and gave Manny a hug.

“Manny, is what that detective said true?”

“Every word of it,” he replied. “We believe the suspect not only killed the boys, but a great many other people.”

“I just can’t believe it,” Principal Fox said. “How did you get involved in all of this?”

“It’s a long, complicated story,” Manny said.

Principal Fox shook her head. “I met with my entire faculty ten minutes ago. I told them that the three of us will lead the students in an orderly dismissal. I did not tell them why. The last thing I want is my teachers suspecting there’s a murderer at the school. Then again, one of them might be the killer for all I know.”

“You did well,” Wendy said. “When does class start?”

“In a few minutes. I will address the students over the PA system as I would on any other morning and act like this is just another normal day, just like Detective Russell instructed.”

Manny said a silent prayer that God would be with them today.

Kevin parked his Pathfinder, but stayed inside the car. He wore a jacket to conceal his weapons. Not taking any chances, he brought the Glock handgun he normally carried, along with a .45 Smith and Wesson and an assault rifle.

He glanced at his watch every few minutes. The time was drawing closer. He couldn't predict where he would encounter Bojorquez, but when the time came, he would focus his energy and mind into the single task of killing the son of a bitch.

Kevin tried not to think about the likelihood that this would be his last day alive. Instead, he sat in silence and used the meditation techniques he learned from his jiu-jitsu training as he waited for the time to come.

Paul chewed on his lower lip after having bit off his fingernails. It was now almost a half-hour since Wendy and Manny had gone into the school building, but there was still no sign of school children leaving. Class was already in session. What the hell is holding them up? Maybe Bojorquez had already encountered Kevin, and his best friend was lying dead on the floor. If something didn't happen soon, he was going to lose his mind.

Paul breathed deeply. He had to control himself. In order for this plan to work, everybody had to do their part. He could not let the others down. Just as the tension dissipated, it flared back up when the first group of students exited the building.

Manny and Wendy sat in the principal's office as she went through her morning announcements. Manny was glad to see she held her composure. He was worried that she would sound flustered.

When Principal Fox completed her announcements, Wendy grabbed her hand. "You did great. Maybe you should think of taking a trip down Hollywood and becoming an actress."

“The entire school has been tense since the seven children disappeared.” Principal Fox sat quietly for a moment, tears welling up in her eyes.

Wendy reached into her purse, pulled out a tissue and handed it to her.

Principal Fox wiped away the tears. “I’m sorry. I just can’t believe the boys are dead.”

“Alex was there when they were murdered,” Manny said. “He saw everything.”

Principal Fox’s mouth dropped open. “Oh, God. The poor kid. How is he?”

Manny breathed deeply. “It’s affected him pretty bad. He hasn’t spoken much since it happened.”

The principal sighed. “Hopefully when this is all over, we can start picking up the pieces, get him access to a grief counselor.”

Manny nodded.

Principal Fox rose from her seat. “All right. Let’s start the evacuation.”

Wendy and Manny covered the first floor, and Principal Fox went to the second floor.

Wendy entered a first grade class. She spoke softly to the teacher. “We’re ready to start.”

The teacher nodded, then introduced Wendy to the first graders.

Wendy said, “Hi class. We’re going to be taking a little field trip today, but we can only take this trip if everyone stays really quiet as we go outside. Do you guys want to go on a field trip?”

The class responded yes in unison.

She and the first grade teacher led the students out of the room. She kept looking around for Kevin and Bojorquez.

At the other end of the hallway, Manny spoke with third and fourth grade students. He also used the field trip story, but told them they were going to the zoo. One friend of Alex's asked, "Hey, Manny, where has Alex been lately? He ain't missin' like Saleen and those other guys?"

"No," Manny replied. "He's home sick."

"You know what happened to them?" the boy asked. "They ain't been around lately."

Manny shook his head, feeling bad about having to lie. "I don't know where they went." He was about to say that he was sure they would be back soon before stopping himself.

Working from one class to the other, Wendy and Manny got the teachers to walk with the students to the outside of the building. Surprisingly, the students were orderly and quiet. Before the first class ended, all of the students had exited the building.

Kevin got the signal from Paul. He moved quickly down the paved walkway, his .45 drawn, held low by his side. He went to the rear of the school building near the flagpole and walked down the steps leading to a back entrance. Fortunately, the door was open.

Kevin stepped inside the building. There were no shouts from students at play, no teachers' voices resonating down the halls, just the sounds of his own movements and his heart racing.

During his previous visit, the principal had shown him the equipment room where Bojorquez frequently could be found. He walked toward that room looking into other rooms on his way. Kevin stopped short when he heard scurrying from the cafeteria. He moved quickly towards the noise. As he approached the cafeteria, he crouched low, but could not see a soul other than a small mouse scurrying across the floor.

He left the cafeteria and walked to the end of the hall. Just as he was about to turn the corner, he came to a sudden stop at the sound

of footsteps. Kevin got to his knees, peered around the corner, and found a man with a broom, sweeping the floor.

Paul bit his nails as a swarm of students converged outside the school. So far things were going as planned. He would not contact Kevin unless something out of the ordinary happened. For all he knew, his friend was in a life and death struggle against that monster right now.

Walking among the students, Manny directed traffic. He could not see Wendy. Paul got out of the car and yelled, "Manny!" He didn't turn around. Paul moved closer and called for Manny again. This time he turned, and Paul motioned for him to come to the car.

Manny moved through the swarm of kids toward Paul's Lexus. "What's going on?"

Paul shook his head. "I haven't heard from Kevin. Have you seen him?"

"No, man."

"Where's Wendy?" Paul asked.

"She was at the other side of the school last I saw her."

"Now what?"

"I guess we wait," Manny said.

Wendy attempted to keep order. The students surrounding her were getting unruly. She searched for Manny but could not find him.

From the corner of her eye, Wendy spotted a young girl walking toward the school entrance. Wendy's eyes opened wide.

She sprinted toward the girl. "Don't go in there!"

The girl kept walking.

"Hey, wait up." Wendy had to intercept her before the girl got inside.

Breathing heavily, Kevin took another look down the hallway. It was Bojorquez. His pulse raced. This was his chance to take him out.

He got his breathing under control. He couldn't afford a mistake. With lightning quick motion, Kevin burst out and pulled the trigger of his Smith and Wesson.

It would have been a deadly accurate shot if Bojorquez hadn't turned. Instead of catching the man in the throat, the bullet grazed his shoulder.

Bojorquez let out a primal scream and dropped to the floor. His eyes met Kevin's and he let out an inhuman growl that reverberated through the hall. Bojorquez did not linger and took off with amazing speed.

Kevin squeezed the trigger again, but missed. "Shit!"

He chased Bojorquez, but even wounded, the man was too fast. Kevin sprinted, trying to stay close.

He turned the corner and glimpsed Bojorquez entering a large room. Kevin was about to fire a shot, but there was no way he could hit him from his position. Instead, he ran into the room with his .45 held high. He had to get Bojorquez before he transformed. Otherwise he was a dead man.

Kevin looked around but did not see Bojorquez. A door closed at the far end of the room, and Kevin ran to a set of stairs leading to the door.

Beyond the door was a large boiler room. Loud clangs sounded, and the heat felt oppressive. A series of pipes ran across the room. Steam poured from one of the pipes and rolled across the floor. Elevated from the floor was a large hot water tank. To the left of the big tank was a grimy looking desk covered with newspaper clippings. He didn't have to look at them but had a good idea what they were about. To the other side of the tank were metal drums. There was ample room to hide in this cluttered room.

Kevin moved past the metal pipes toward the water tank. He turned at the sound of feet shuffling. He whirled around, but not

quickly enough to avoid a swinging metal pipe. He used his forearm to deflect the blow, and the pipe glanced off his arm. The second shot connected solidly to his ribs. A loud crack sounded. Kevin howled in pain and doubled over, clutching his wounded ribs. He held onto his gun and gasped for breath, before dropping to the floor, unable to take anything more than shallow breaths.

He looked up. Bojorquez was climbing the stairs leading past the boiler room. Fighting the intense pain, Kevin got to his feet. He could not let Conjesero get away, no matter what.

Juan Antonio Bojorquez shook his head in disbelief when he realized the detective was still pursuing him. The son of a bitch had toughness as well as a set of balls. He had been correct all along. The detective was a worthy adversary. A dead one, but a worthy one. After the death and destruction he created in the prison, he thought for sure the detective wanted no part of Conjesero. Somehow, the female cop knew his identity. The only thing that made sense was that Russell must have told her about him. How this detective came to know about Conjesero was a complete mystery, one that he would never find out since dead man can't talk.

Bojorquez frowned when he exited the school building and found hundreds of students outside. He ran toward the parking lot. It was time to become Conjesero. His time as Juan Antonio Bojorquez, the janitor of Farrell Elementary School, was over. He would move and take another alias. The only thing left here was to finish off the detective, who would soon learn first-hand the destructive nature of Conjesero.

He went to the side of the building that faced the parking lot. He had to find quiet solitude deep inside and devote his energy to concentrate on the transformation. He settled his breathing and started to make the change.

The buttons of his gray shirt popped as his chest and upper torso expanded. Thick hair grew on his legs and chest.

Paul chewed his fingernails as he watched the children from his car. Manny sat in the passenger seat, worry etched on his face. They had yet to hear from Kevin.

From the corner of his eye, a figure emerged. His heart sunk. Juan Antonio Bojorquez. “Motherfucker!”

“What’s up?” Manny asked.

“Get out of the car,” Paul yelled.

“Why?”

“Just get out. Now!”

Manny’s mouth hung open. Without arguing, he got out of the Lexus.

Paul did not know if he would survive this ordeal, but looking at the janitor brought out all of the rage and frustration of his nightmares. He gunned the accelerator and drove the car over a curb and onto the grass in front of the school. He continued to drive through the school’s lawn toward the wall, right at his target, who was going through a metamorphosis.

By the time he made impact, his car had reached forty miles per hour. The Lexus smashed through Bojorquez and against the brick wall of the school building before bouncing off. His airbag went off, saving him from serious injury.

Kevin limped his way up the stairs that led out of the boiler room and entered the hallway, feeling utterly disoriented. A loud crash startled him. He ran to the main entrance of the school, gritting his teeth, still holding the .45.

When he turned the corner of the hallway en route to the principal’s office, he encountered Conjesero. He still had human facial features and stood like a man, but thick hair covered his body. He had a spiked tail and long, metallic claws coming from his hands.

Based on how gingerly he moved, Conjesero must have been badly wounded.

Kevin was about to shoot when a burst of flame erupted from Conjesero's mouth. Before he could move out of the way, the flame hit him on the right side of his face and neck. His jacket caught on fire. Kevin desperately tried to remove it. As he was doing so, Conjesero's backhand knocked him out cold.

Wendy reached the young girl who was about to wander into the school and grabbed her by the shoulder. "You can't go in there."

"But my doll's inside. I have to get Blondy." The girl was near tears.

"I'll get it for you," Wendy said. "But first you have to walk back and join the rest of your class."

"Okay. Please get her for me." The girl smiled, turned, and walked away.

Wendy was about to join her when a loud crash sounded. She hurried toward the source of the noise and froze at the sight of Conjesero inside the front door of the school building. He had long ears and a spiked tail but was only partially transformed. He still had human facial features and was walking toward Kevin's prone body. Without thinking, she ran to save her lover.

She sprinted to the front entrance and entered the school. She leapt onto his back, knocking him to the floor. She reached for the can of mace she always carried in her purse. Conjesero turned his head, and she sprayed him in the face. The beast howled and stepped backed.

Conjesero roared, then grabbed Wendy by the hair. He threw her against the wall, and she crumpled to the floor. Pain and darkness filled her world as Conjesero smashed her repeatedly with a barrage of heavy fists. She could not even see. Blood poured from her forehead, nose, and cheeks, which had been torn by Conjesero's claws.

When Kevin opened his eyes, the room spun out of control. He closed his eyes, trying to remember what happened. He had been preparing to shoot Conjesero before a blast of fire hit him.

A terrible wailing sound brought him back. He opened his eyes and looked around the room. A rage built inside of him when he found Conjesero thrashing Wendy's prone body.

Kevin stood and stumbled like a punch-drunk fighter. He approached Conjesero. With all the force he could muster, Kevin landed a side kick to the back of the beast's head, knocking Conjesero over.

Kevin found the .45 on the floor. He lunged for it as Conjesero stood once again. Kevin reached the gun and rolled on the floor. Conjesero's monstrous figure stood a few feet in front of him. He pulled the trigger. The blast sent Conjesero backward, a massive hole opening in his chest cavity.

Kevin groaned as consciousness ebbed. The job was not over yet. Not with this fiend. Watching all of those horror movies had taught him to make sure the monster was dead. He stumbled forward, grabbed Conjesero's head and turned it to the wall. Aiming for his face, he unloaded all of the bullets in the .45. When he was done he contemplated going back for the assault rifle that was in his jacket, but lacked the strength. He fell forward and held the bloody wrist of Conjesero, feeling for a pulse. There was none. He breathed a sigh of relief and fell backward. Everything went black.

Manny ran towards Paul's Lexus after the crash. He struggled to open up the door of the vehicle. Using all of his strength, he opened it, then dragged Paul outside.

Paul groaned. "What happened to Kevin?"

A shot sounded from inside the building. Seconds later, more shots rang.

Sprinting to the entrance, he went through the main door and looked in horror at the still bodies of Detective Russell, Wendy, and the janitor. The janitor's transformation had reversed itself and he looked like a normal person, except for the bullet holes that riddled his body. The place was an absolute blood-bath. He tried to hold it in and barely managed to keep himself from vomiting.

Manny closed his eyes and tried to control his breathing. He had to help Detective Russell and Wendy. They were still alive. The janitor, on the other hand, was very much dead. Conjesero was no more. Moments later, several teachers entered the building. Manny told them to call an ambulance. Wendy seemed to be injured worse than Detective Russell. He removed his shirt and tore it in two, trying to stop Wendy's bleeding.

Chapter XL

Kevin walked in through the main entrance of the Saint Francis Medical Center, glad to be away from anything work-related. Ever since the death of Conjesero, formerly known as Juan Antonio Bojorquez, formerly known as Angel Hernandez, his life had been a series of debriefings, interviews, updates, and creative explanations.

He took a deep breath before entering the elevator. The last time he saw Wendy, she had just come out of plastic surgery. He had been to the hospital a dozen times— whenever he had a reprieve— over the past few days. During his visits, Wendy was usually asleep or incoherent.

Kevin winced when he stepped aside to make room for a hospital orderly. Any sudden movement caused pain to explode from his broken ribs. Against doctor's orders, he left the hospital following the ordeal at the school that same day.

Wendy, on the other hand, had no choice in the matter. That first day, the doctors weren't sure she would live. Each day, her prognosis improved. She had suffered a grade two concussion as well as numerous lacerations. The plastic surgery performed on her face yesterday would not be the last of the surgeries to repair the damage, but she was a fighter and she would make it through this. It could have been worse. He counted his blessings every night that she didn't die. The steel she showed by coming to save him made him feel something between awe and total adoration for her.

As he exited the elevator onto the third floor, Kevin spotted Paul and Manny heading in his direction. They must have been visiting Wendy. He shook hands with both of them.

"Hey, chief," Paul said. "I think you're more popular than George Clooney. I can't flip around the TV without seeing your ugly mug."

Manny smiled. "Detective Kevin Russell, my hero."

"Enough with that," Kevin said.

"And he's humble too," Paul said. "So what's the latest?"

“The Feds, the police commissioner, the mayor and just about everyone else is having a hard time believing that Bojorquez was responsible for these killings. I’ve done my best to assure them that he was the culprit and the killings will end with his death. I think they want to believe that part of it.”

“How’s Wendy?” Kevin asked.

“She’s had better days,” Manny said. “She’s still a bit messed up from the operation. Her face is all bandaged, but the surgeon seemed encouraged by the results.”

“That’s good news. I’ve been worried sick.” Kevin sighed. “That first day was rough. She lost so much blood. That was some real heads-up thinking, Manny. You saved her life by stopping the bleeding. If not for that, she might not have made it to the hospital.”

Manny shrugged. “You know, it’s going to be hard getting back to just being a regular student. That was a rush, man, going after Conjesero.”

Kevin raised his brows. “Leave the cop stuff to me. You have a bright future in front of you, kid. Make your mom proud and be a good example for Alex. Your brother went through five kinds of hell. He idolizes you. You have to guide him out of this mess.”

Manny nodded. “I know. I’m going to be there for my little brother.”

“He’s a tough kid. I think he’ll be all right.”

Paul put his hand on Kevin’s shoulder. “We’ll let you go see Wendy. I’m treating Manny to some killer Peruvian food at a place near his school.”

“It was good seeing you two. I’ll be in touch.”

Kevin walked into Wendy’s room. Since she was a resident at the hospital, they treated her like a VIP patient with a multitude of physicians and nurses overseeing her. Her room was overflowing with flowers and balloons.

Her eyes were closed, but her hand moved. It broke his heart all over again to see her bandaged like that. She had been through so much, and her battle was far from over.

Wendy opened her eyes. “Hi.” Her voice was barely above a whisper.

Kevin kissed her gently on the forehead. “How are you holding up?”

“I feel like I got run over by a freight train.”

“That’s not far from the truth.”

“I keep getting flashes of what happened, but I can’t really remember it,” Wendy said. “It was like being caught in some deep, dark tidal wave.”

“The only thing that matters is that you survived; we survived.” Kevin held her hand. “The nightmare’s over. Soon, it’ll be a fading memory.”

“I don’t think I’ll ever forget.”

Kevin nodded. His mind flashed back to his battle with Conjesero. Of all the images that he saw, the one that will forever be engrained in his memories was Conjesero clubbing Wendy as she lay bleeding on the floor.

Wendy’s soft cries snapped him out of his thoughts.

“What’s wrong, baby?”

She shook her head. “My face is mangled. I look hideous.”

Kevin kissed her hand. “Your face will heal. Your scars will go away. Before long, you’ll be back to normal. The surgeon is optimistic about how everything turned out. But none of that matters to me. The reason I love you has nothing to do with your looks. It’s what’s inside of you, and I would consider myself the luckiest guy in the world if you were willing to have me.”

“Of course I will.”

Kevin cradled Wendy in his arms. He knew the recovery would be long and hard, but he would be with her every step of the way.

Reconquest: Mother Earth

By Carl Alves

SEAL Mitch Grace was among the first humans to see the aliens when they landed at the naval base where he was stationed, but like the rest of humanity, he was powerless to stop them.

Five years later, Mitch awakens from his coma under the care of an alien physician to find that aliens control the planet. Starting alone, as a one man army, he rallies the surviving humans to build a resistance movement to take the planet back from the alien conquerors. After his capture by the aliens, Mitch is forced into intergalactic slavery to become a gladiator, fighting as the sole representative of the human species. Against all odds and far from home, he lays the plans for the reconquest of his homeland.

Reconquest: Mother Earth is the thrilling combination of Red Dawn, Independence Day, and Gladiator.

Two For Eternity

By Carl Alves

From the beginning of human history, two immortal beings have battled against each other. Vrag has pulled the strings of malevolent leaders, and has caused endless destruction and chaos. Raiken, his immortal counterpart, has opposed him at every turn.

Two for Eternity is both an historical and contemporary fantasy thriller that takes many controversial interpretations of history. From ancient Egypt and Babylon, through the time of Christ in Judea, spanning the Crusades, the Spanish Inquisition, through World War II, Raiken and Vrag have engaged in an inhuman battle of wills. Now, the stakes have never been higher as Vrag has set his sights on the destruction of society. Raiken has always been the defender of humanity against his immortal enemy. They will battle one last time to settle their score for eternity.

“A satisfying blend of fantasy, thriller, and historical fiction. Alves has carved out his own genre.” – Scott Nicholson, *The Red Church*

Blood Street

By Carl Alves

Blood Street is True Blood meets the Sopranos set in the streets of Philadelphia.

When vampires tangle with the Philadelphia mafia, one thing is certain - all hell is going to break loose.

Alexei chose the wrong neighborhood to claim his latest victim, a member of Enzo Salerno's crime syndicate. Now Philadelphia mob boss Enzo Salerno is determined to hunt down the man who killed his associate in such gruesome fashion in his South Philly row home and serve his own brand of old fashioned Italian style vengeance.

Perplexed by this unnatural murder, Salerno uncovers clues that lead him to believe that this was not a mob hit, and that a vampire was responsible for this death. Magnus, the leader of Alexei's brood, must use all of his resources to save them from both the mafia and the FBI, sparking a bloody war that plays out in the streets of Philadelphia. Who will survive on Blood Street?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Carl went to Boston University majoring in Biomedical Engineering. Carl graduated with a BS degree, and has since worked in the pharmaceutical and medical devices industries. He later graduated from Lehigh University with an MBA degree. His debut novel *Two For Eternity* was originally released by Weaving Dreams Publishing. He describes his second novel *Blood Street* as *True Blood* meets *The Sopranos* set in the streets of Philadelphia. His novel *Reconquest: Mother Earth* was released in 2014 by Montag Press. His short fiction has appeared in various publications such as *Blood Reign Lit*, *Alien Skin*, and *Dark Eclipse*. He is a member of the Horror Writers Association and has attended the Penn Writers Conference. You can visit his website at www.carlalves.com.