DO & DIE

....

A Book/Plot that enlightens and inspires

By

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AKA

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Prologue

Outwardly strong men need self-worth and are easy targets of the dark purple haze. Two men, living over a thousand miles apart, have different beliefs—they are complete opposites.

Kenneth Saxton is an unemployed logger during the Spotted Owl logging shutdown. After the unemployment checks cease, he puts a long gun to his head at the family's cabin near Zigzag, Oregon. Richard Johnson, an assembly line manager for Trask Trailers in Long Beach, California, has a private meeting with a non-company auditor. From the twelfth story of a hotel balcony, Richard discerns jumping to end his disgrace…

That same weekend, the hired auditor rear-ends a semi-truck after the brakes on a gifted SL600 Mercedes-Benz convertible fail. Kevin Trask receives one of these same limited-edition SL600 sports cars as a graduation gift and is headed to Shasta Lake to meet up with friends for a houseboat graduation party. Tina will be there, ready to straighten out Kevin's past sexual proselytization. All brought on by what the founder of Trask Trailers made him do during adolescence.

After three days of drinking, drugs, sex, and Rohypnol, Kevin leaves the houseboat flotilla to climb Mt. Hood. The Do-or-Die mantra that prideful mountain climbers repeat over and over is so often about being self-centered and self-achievement. Unlike Do-and-Die, a term that superheroes and extraordinary people live by daily.

Gus Watt, the security guard at the Trask manufacturing plant, has his own three-word mantra, "Trust-in-God," and continually repeats it to everyone going through his gate. Two letters and one number are what Gus is fixated on—Y2K.

Kevin Trask, the soon-to-be heir of the Trask dynasty and employer of thousands, is ready for a new journey outside of basketball and running the trailer manufacturing plant. A timely opportunity to sell out to a Chinese entity appears on the horizon, the summer he graduates from an elite college. That same year, the Duke Blue Devils won their third NCAA Division one championship.

Kevin's subconscious is seeking its own personal mantra and fulfillment as a man—God willing.

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DEDICATION

For all the special children and adults who have touched my soul in so many ways. I feel their love in the silence and evaluate my joy and thankfulness. These unique individuals enlighten lives and display eternal hope. Some of them become special characters in my books.

May the Holy Spirit send strength and support to their families now and forever.

Amen

Chap 1——————Locker room fight

Staggering toward the stone fireplace, Kenneth's trembling hand grasped the old rifle from its resting place above the wooden mantle. His other hand found the brass casing at the bottom of the tattered pocket of his blue flannel shirt. He pulled back the bolt and inserted the bullet. There was a loud thump as the butt of the rifle made contact with the dusty wooden plank floor. He twisted his broad shoulders to the right and rested his head against the barrel—the cold steel pushed into his temple. The alcohol had helped build the needed courage, or at least lessen the anxiety. *I give up. My family will be much better off. I have to do this. I need to end this hell. I miss Billy. Jesus, please show your mercy on my soul.* Kenneth had run these thoughts over and over. He drew one long final breath.

When his finger found the trigger, a loud squawk rang from outside. The harsh call passed in and through the stale air of the cabin. The ear-piercing squawk rang out two more times. The screaming noise forced Kenneth to unclench his eyes and take his mutilated finger off the trigger. Everything seemed out of focus and surrounded by a dark purple haze. The squawk had come from the front deck of the A-frame cabin. Ken's eyes slowly scanned up and down the thirty-foot bank of floor-to-ceiling French-pane windows. Pushed up against the glass wall was an old pine table that he and his father had built. Above the table, on a crossbeam, hung a six-foot bucksaw, one of the tools his grandfather had used to build this cabin. The crossbeams displayed deer and elk racks from three generations of hunters. The eyeful of memories was draining on Kenneth—weakening him in this last, concluding act.

With his finger back on the trigger, Kenneth gritted his teeth and closed his eyes for the second time. The screech penetrated through the cabin again. This time, Ken yielded to the distraction and slowly straightened up. His lower back got worn out over the years of logging. The wood floor creaked as he crept toward the fading yellow light. At the window, Kenneth wiped a swatch through a decade of dust. The long, brilliant rays of the setting sun

penetrated his bloodshot eyes. Temporarily blinded by the sun, he laid the rifle against the green-painted pine table. Ken pulled out a chair and plopped down. It took at least a minute for his vision to clear and his sore back to loosen.

The whisky bottle and letter on the table were the first to come back into focus. Ken picked up the official-looking letter displaying the State of Oregon seal for the hundredth time. The bold red word **DENIED** across the page was all that he stared at. Kenneth could not read any of the other words. It didn't matter. For the last six months, he had known that the unemployment checks would eventually cease and there would be no more benefits.

After four more drinks and only a few drops of brown whisky left in the bottle, Kenneth's journey extended forty more minutes into dusk. Now too drunk to stand, he fumbled with the rifle. The wooden stock made the same loud thud when it struck the floor. Again, Kenneth turned his head and rested his temple on the cold steel barrel. And again, the loud squawking rang out! The sun was now behind the mountains, and Kenneth could see the fading light through the dirty glass. His eyes locked on the old gray snag, once a live green Douglas fir tree. The one he had climbed and explored as a child. Kenny longed for those carefree days—so long ago.

Suddenly, from out of nowhere, a giant Bald Eagle swooped down and landed on the front deck railing. The Eagle canted its white head to stare back in through the bank of windows, its bright orange eye locked onto Kenneth. For the longest time, the staring continued, and neither flinched. Kenneth now had an audience, something he had planned so carefully to avoid. But this was a bird, not his wife or daughter. Ken's finger reached for the trigger—there was only one way to end this stare-down.

Just as he started to apply pressure, the Eagle turned its head to look away. It was what Kenneth did not see that caught his attention. He slowly rose off the chair and peered into the oncoming night through the window. The Eagle had no eye on this side of its head. There was just a dark hole where an orange eye should have been. Kenneth tapped at the glass to get the giant bird to turn its head around. The Eagle would not budge, and no eye-to-eye contact was made.

Ken tapped and then banged on the glass, trying to make the giant bird turn its head back to the good-eye side. Strangely, Kenneth could still feel the Eagle's gaze in some telepathic message. The blank stare from that blind side of the Eagle's head seemed more intense than that from the good eye. "Quit looking at me!" Kenneth yelled.

Kenneth stood, staggered, stepped back, and without a second thought, pointed the rifle at the Eagle—with rage, he pulled the trigger, and the glass exploded outward. The gunshot seemed

muffled, almost silent; everything seemed to have slowed, including the bullet as it exited the rifle. Smoke rolling out the end of the barrel had a dark purple haze and slowly got sucked out of the cabin through the small shot-out glass pane. The trail of purple smoke quickly floated upward into the darkening night.

With the grace of a lofting angel, the Eagle spread its wings and flew to the top of the old snag with two giant swoops. The once green Douglas fir that Kenneth had climbed and explored as a young boy. The lone bullet was gone, and so was Kenneth's strength. He plopped down on the wooden floor, leaned his head against the leg of the green pine table, and gazed out through the glass.

Lastly, the Bald Eagle turned its head back toward the cabin and spread its giant wings. The white-tipped feathers from wing to wing spanned at least seven feet. The one-eyed Eagle turned back one last time and gazed just before it flew off toward the fading light in the western sky.

The smoke that had exited from the rifle balled up around the top of the stone chimney up on the roof, waiting to get sucked back in, but the dark moment passed. Like a jet's vapor trail, the purple haze wisped off, not toward the light in the west or the darkening eastern sky. The hazy cloud headed 966 miles due south, looking for another weak and willing soul.

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Richard Johnson was drinking whiskey and staring mindlessly through the glass at a small table. His gaze was not on the massive Pacific Northwest forest but on Los Angeles's concrete jungle. From the tenth floor of the Holiday Inn, he gazed upon asphalt, parked cars, two swimming pools, and the endless motion of all the busy people. Richard kept telling himself: *I give up. My family will be better off. I have to do this. I need to end this. I so want to see my son. Allah, I beg you to release me from this continuation of torment.*

The sound of the bathroom door broke Richard's alcohol-diluted thought process. A half-dressed blond, young enough to be his daughter, walked between the queen-sized beds to gather her things. "It's okay, Mr. Johnson," Cindy offered as she hooked her bra behind her back and slipped into her white blouse.

Richard was disgusted with himself and did not turn away from the glass door. He slowly closed his eyes. Twenty-six years of marriage, and he had never been unfaithful—being with a white woman somehow made it worse. Richard told himself *this tenth-floor balcony is more than high enough to end it all.*

"Hey, they say it happens to the best of men," Cindy said, walking toward the motel room door. She paused and picked up her blazer and the attaché case off the undisturbed bed.

"Yeah, whatever. I have so much on my mind," muttered Richard as he opened his eyes, not turning from the sliding glass door.

"I understand, with the loss of Jabbar and all." Cindy picked up her pace toward the door.

Richard's head jerked around toward Cindy! "How do you know my son's name?"

"Ah, Condi in the Trask corporate offices told me about the shooting." Cindy's hand found the doorknob. "Or, maybe someone on the assembly line or one of the workers building trailers. I don't recall, but I'm sorry. I was hoping I could make you feel better." Cindy's half-hearted sincerity was cut short when the motel door slammed closed.

Richard listened to her high heels clicking down the hallway, followed by the elevator ***ding***. In the silence, a purple haze began to fill the room. Richard drank more whiskey while gazing at the wrought iron balcony railing. That was covered with pigeon droppings and too high to step over. *I will need to stand on a chair to finalize all this—*

Richard fumbled with the metal latch on the door. After several minutes of gray solitude and four more ounces of whiskey, he could only open the door about a foot. The whiskey was rapidly working on his senses; it took a few more minutes before Richard spotted the spring-loaded pin at the bottom of the aluminum door track. The moment he bent over, a flow of nausea rushed into his now-spinning skull. Richard's fingers found the pin. He pulled it back and slid the glass door open, then stood and steadied himself.

Out of nowhere, three pigeons flew and landed on the railing to protect their tenth-floor coup. Their heads bobbed as they moved back and forth on the metal railing, making low-pitched cooing noises in a territorial chant. Richard watched the birds and listened through the screen. The last few ounces of whiskey would give him the needed willpower. With his mouth over the opening and head tilted back, the last of the brown liquid felt warm as it went down his throat.

Richard slid open the screen about six inches and swooshed the empty whiskey bottle. One of the pigeons jumped onto the screen door, using its claws to hold on! Richard smacked the gray bird with the whiskey bottle. Its claws got hooked into the screen, and now it hung upside down, motionless. Richard batted at the screen from inside, and the limp bird fell with a soft thud. The other birds started strutting, cooing, and moving back and forth on the railing. Their deep red-colored eyes glared at Richard behind the screen.

Richard turned from the bead-like ruby-red eyes and surveyed the motel room. He reasoned that a whiskey bottle thrown from ten floors up could kill someone below. *I need something to swing or poke at those birds to scare them away*. *I don't need an audience.* He steadied himself and scanned the room for a long stick or something*. My belt lying over there on the bed will work. I'll use it to swing at those damn birds. Then I'll move a chair against the railing and…*

The sound of fluttering feathers got Richard's attention. The pigeons had flown from the railing to the deck and circled the motionless bird. When Richard glanced downward, a reflection from something in the parking lot flashed up through the railing slats. He moved closer to the door and rose on his toes to see over the top of the railing. *That's Cindy down there. Why is she talking to two men? I saw those Asian men at Trask corporate offices.*

Below in the far corner of the motel parking lot, the trio opened and closed the doors on the convertible, readying for a test drive. Cindy was talking to the Asian man while rubbing her hand on the chrome windshield trim and admiring the prestigious Mercedes hood emblem. One of the men got behind the steering wheel, and then a retractable roll bar slowly appeared behind the seat. *I've seen that roll bar go up and down before. That's like the car Mr. Trask gave to Kevin at the graduation party.* Richard rose on his toes again; he canted sideways and had to catch himself with the back of a chair. The pigeons were active, circling and cooing, down by his feet.

Cindy was checking out the features of the Mercedes, and as agreed, this car was now hers. All her acting classes had paid off; she knew how to play to the correct camera angle. The undercover agents were happy with her overnight performance. They had more than enough blackmail material.

Richard canted sideways and refocused on the room. *I'll use my belt on the bed to scare the birds away. I need to yell down at the trio. Maybe I've been set up?* He drew a deep breath, steadied himself, and staggered toward the beds. His foot stepped on a glass ashtray that Cindy had left on the floor. His ankle twisted, and he crashed onto the still-made bed. The bottom of his foot felt a sharp pain, and his ankle throbbed. When he rolled onto his back to massage his foot, the ceiling started to spin.

Outside, Cindy was leaving the Holiday Inn parking lot in the 1994 concept-model Mercedes-Benz SL600, a car that would not be released for another year. Now, she could park in a Hollywood studio parking lot and wait for some famous director to pull up. Calculatedly, she'd step out, ensuring her long legs, short skirt, and tight blouse with nothing underneath would get noticed. Finally, her acting career would launch.

Keeping his eyes closed was the only way to keep the unwanted merry-go-round at rest. On top of three martinis and a lobster dinner, the bourbon wanted to explode from Richards's stomach. The thought of jumping from the balcony stalled. Now Richard wanted to know who had set him up. *I need to lie here for a few minutes. I need to get my thoughts in order.* Ten minutes passed, resulting in a faster-spinning room. Now, every sound seemed to come from a megaphone close to his ears. Sirens overcame the buzz of neighborhood lawnmowers and leaf blowers as they passed through the open sliding glass door.

A short time ago, the brake pedal on the Mercedes SL600 went to the floor. The prototype sports car plowed under the rear trailer of a semi-truck on Interstate 5. Cindy's life ended instantly. Her flawless decapitated body had the weekend Los Angeles traffic backed up to the Holiday Inn freeway on-ramp. This day, the rubberneck gawkers got their fix—her beautiful head and blood-soaked blond hair lay on the hot black asphalt in the truck lane of Interstate 5.

Richard pushed two pillows up to both sides of his head, hoping to drown out the bullhorns of the emergency vehicles navigating through traffic. He gradually rolled onto his side and then sat on the edge of the bed; his legs felt like rubber when he tried to stand. The sirens were echoing around the motel room and penetrating his skull. Richard needed to slide the glass door closed.

A deep breath and half attempt at standing sent him to the floor, just inches from the bathroom door. His eyes were level with the tile floor, and a pile of wet towels that Cindy had dried off with. It looked as though the bathroom was still steamed up. A gray mist was still hanging like a fog in the bathroom. Oddly, the mirror had no vapor on it.

Slowly, the gray steam turned into a purplish-colored funnel cloud, and its tail touched Cindy's wet towels. Richard closed his eyes—drunkenness was causing him to hallucinate. With all his strength, he got onto his hands and knees. The funnel cloud now looked like a mini tornado; it violently exited the bathroom and knocked Richard back to the floor.

The purple twister violently tore through the open door. It paused on the deck; the funnel tip extended to the motionless gray pigeon. The pigeon got sucked up into the whirlwind; as it spun upward, the grey feathers turned to a brilliant white. The gray pigeon morphed into a white dove. The violent whirlwind ceased—a white dove flew off.

Thirty-three miles northeast of the Holiday Inn, another concept model Mercedes SL600 brake lights were flashing on and off. This brake pedal was solid and didn't go to the floor. Tina was sitting in the leather driver's seat, looking at her blond hair in the

rearview mirror and then watching down the long brick driveway in the side mirrors. The six-speaker sound system blared out music as she tapped her red, manicured fingernails on the walnut console, her foot tapping the brake pedal in time to the music. The custom prototype Mercedes was also a gift—only this one didn't have pinholes in the brake lines.

The six coats of lacquer protected the wood, but Tina's red nail polish was not resilient; tiny red flecks of fingernail paint flaked onto the center console. Finally, in the side mirror, Kevin's brawny physique appeared at the gate at the beginning of the long brick driveway. His gray athletic shirt featured a Blue Devil mascot and the words "Duke University Basketball." Kevin punched four numbers on a security pad, and the ten-by-ten-foot iron entrance moved sideways. Tina anxiously watched Kevin slip between the metal and brick wall before the gate opened a little more than a foot. She hastily opened the car door and twisted in the leather seat. The white cotton sundress got hiked up, exposing shapely, tanned legs.

Tina cat-walked down the driver's side of the SL600 and positioned herself on the trunk. One heel rested on the bumper, the other foot on the ground. She put both her hands behind the trunk. The wind caught the cotton dress, exposing more legs. She slightly arched her back, and her breasts were now on show. The pose would make a great photo—maybe Miss June for an automotive shop calendar.

As Kevin jogged up the driveway, his muscular legs flexed, and sweat dripped off his face onto the basketball jersey. A few feet from Tina, he stopped, bent over, put his hands on his knees, and drew a few deep breaths. "I wish you wouldn't," Kevin drew another deep breath, "sit on my car." A few more breaths, "You could scratch the paint."

"Kevin, you worry too much," Tina quipped. "Like, I would purposely scratch your precious car," she said, sliding off the trunk. Tina noticed how Kevin's eyes cast downward. She was in control—not Kevin. "Your Father can always buy you a new one."

Kevin's eyes moved up; he was still drawing in gallons of air. "I earned this car by keeping up my grades and playing basketball. I attended Duke on an academic scholarship. My Dad didn't pay one penny toward my tuition."

"Like Trask Inc. couldn't afford to pay for a college education? Like the Trask family needed a scholarship?" Tina moved toward Kevin and ran her fingers through his wet hair. "Whatever, Kevin, let's take your new car to the lake."

Kevin straightened up and looked deep into Tina's large green eyes. "Do not ever say anything about my Dad buying me this car," Kevin warned. "I earned it!" Kevin drew another deep breath and

pulled Tina's hand off his head. "If you think differently, you don't know what I'm about."

"Sorry, don't be so defensive. It was the wrong thing for me to say. Like, I know how hard you worked in college. I suffered, too." Tina stepped back. "Remember, I had to fly coach to some of your games."

Kevin's concentration was drawn toward a noisy motor sound. The groundskeeper started trimming Ivy from the tall brick wall surrounding the five-acre Trask estate. "You know, I didn't want this car. I'm content to keep the Land Rover I drove at college. I am sure my Dad cut a deal for the car; he's always working an angle."

"Like, just forget about the car," replied Tina in a sultry tone while pushing into Kevin. "Why don't I show you how happy you are home for good?" Tina slipped her arms around Kevin's waist and positioned herself so the white cotton dress pressed hard against the thin running shorts.

"Hey, I'm all sweaty," Kevin said as he pulled back.

"I like my men sweaty," Tina replied in a sexy tone.

The sound of a door latch rattling got Tina and Kevin's attention, so they looked at the white marble stairs. The left side of the glass double doors swung open. A tanned, fit woman in stylish blue tennis shorts walked out onto the porch. "Good morning," Linda said. "Kevin, your father would like to speak to you. Don't keep him waiting."

"Good morning, Linda. Are you playing tennis this morning?" Tina asked while easing the stronghold around Kevin's waist.

"I'm not sure. Robert and I were supposed to play some of his new business associates." Mrs. Trask looked over at the groundskeeper. "But there has been a change of plans. Something about a Chinese custom of women not playing men."

"What's that all about? Are they from the Stone Age?" Tina asked

"I'm not exactly sure," replied Mrs. Trask.

"Well, good luck if you do get to play," said Tina.

"Thanks," Linda replied with a strained smile. "Kevin, your father is going to ask you to take my place for the tennis match at the club."

"Okay, I'll be right there." Kevin wiped the sweat on his forehead.

Linda vanished through the ten-foot double glass door into the Trask mansion.

"The club, that place is so boring. Are you going to go?" Tina asked Kevin.

"I wasn't planning on it. But, before I left to run this morning, Robert mentioned not getting too tired. That I might have to fill in for Linda."

"That sucks. Your mom loves tennis."

"I know. But men playing against women isn't biologically fair." Kevin took a deep breath. "And yes, I will try to get out of it."

"Men against men, that's corny. What kind of sexist pig says women can't play against men? I know how competitive your mom is. She could probably beat them."

"Tina, basketball is men against men, and so is football. And yes, she can beat almost any man. Mom was ranked in the U.S. Top Ten Women Singles for three years."

"I didn't know that. Like, your mom is that good?" Tina asked.

"Yes, she was that good before she married Robert," Kevin answered.

"Then what happened?" asked Tina.

"It's my mom's story, ask her about it." Kevin reached out for Tina's hand. "Somehow, I'm going to get out of going to the club." Kevin looked directly into Tina's hazel eyes and said in a drawn-out, apologetic tone. "I planned to hang around here today and pack a few things. I've been thinking about doing some backpacking before I have to start work next month."

"Backpacking! What about the Lake Shasta party?" Tina asked in a panic.

"Tina, can't we pass on the Lake Shasta thing?"

"Kevin, everyone is going to be there. Like, they've rented four houseboats."

"Everyone? Four houseboats!" Kevin threw Tina's hand down. "I thought it was only going to be a few couples."

"Well. Tim got involved," Tina sheepishly replied. "And you know Tim."

Kevin's throat was tightening. "You told me maybe three graduating seniors from the Duke Basketball team and their girlfriends. You told me just the girls you hung with at the games!"

"That was the plan, but you know Tim Baylor is the captain. He felt like he had to invite everyone on the team," Tina replied defensively. "Tim asked me to invite some of the volleyball squad from Pepperdine," Tina added softly.

"And they'll invite their friends, great!" Kevin put his hand on his forehead and started rubbing it. After a long pause, he continued. "Tina, I told you I'm tired of all the partying. Since graduation, it's been almost a month of nonstop, excessive, loud celebrating and backbiting."

"Kevin, you're such a party stiff. Like, you did promise me that we would go." Tina batted her eyes. "We can always rent our private houseboat." Tina moved closer to Kevin and arched her

back so the thin summer dress pushed tight against Kevin's running shorts. "Then we can drift off, be alone, and have a private party."

Kevin put his hands on Tina's shoulders, pushed her away, and then darted for the marble stairs. He looked over his shoulder from the third stair and shouted, "I'll call you later. Why don't we go hiking to be alone?"

A full-sized Latino woman greeted Kevin just inside the Italian-etched glass double doors. "Did you have a good run, sir?"

Kevin slipped off his running shoes and exchanged them for a big white towel that the maid held out. "Maria, could you keep calling me Kevin? You've known me since fourth grade." Kevin started wiping the sweat off his face.

"Okay," Maria replied. "It will be hard because you've been away at college for four years and are older."

"Maria, why should that change things? You're the one who was always here when I got home from school. Remember how we would shoot hoops out back?"

"I remember," Marie paused and looked down. "That is when I was just out of high school and when I was a few less pounds." What Marie remembered about Kevin's after-school years was when they got caught skinny-dipping in the pool by Grandpa Trask. An event that Kevin was still paying mental anguish over.

"Maria, just call me Kevin. We're childhood friends. Do you want me to call you Ms. Gomez since you're older now, too?"

"No. But it just feels weird." Maria looked up, noting how distinguished and handsome Kevin had become. "Soon, you will be Vice President at Trask Enterprises; I can't treat you like my teenage amigo. It would show disrespect."

"Granted, Maria, things change, but our friendship is one thing that will always stay the same." Kevin reached over and put his hand on Maria's shoulder. "Remember what Grandpa Trask made us do?"

Maria glanced down; her face was turning red. It was Grandpa Trask who had made a secret pact with both of them after he had caught them naked in the pool. Something she had hoped Kevin would have forgotten.

Kevin moved his hand from Maria's shoulder and lifted her chin. "And, who told you that I'm going to be the VP at Trask Corporation?"

"I've listened to your Padre talking about it all these years you've been away at college. Please do not say anything to Mr. Trask. I should not have said anything to you." Maria's voice took on a worried tone. "Senior Trask is expecting me to inform you. You shouldn't keep him waiting."

"You worry too much. I might not even go to work at the family business," Kevin replied while handing the towel back to Maria.

Maria gave a surprised look. "Well, that's not my dealings. But you better not keep your Padre waiting."

Kevin looked back over his shoulder. "Where is my father?"

"He's having breakfast out by the pool."

"Gracias," Kevin replied, then walked across the black and white, square Italian floor tiles. He went through the study and pushed open the French glass doors facing the private three-acre backyard. Mr. Trask was at the pool, sitting under a shade umbrella and reading the morning newspaper. When Kevin approached the table, Trask senior did not look up; he was deep into the Wall Street Journal business section. Kevin hated the game.

Thirty seconds passed. Kevin pulled off his shirt, tossed it onto the white patio chair, walked to the pool's edge, and dove in. He swam the entire length underwater, something he had done thousands of times as a boy. At the pool's far end, Kevin held onto the chrome ladder and looked over his shoulder. Mr. Trask was now looking at some photos that had just arrived in a brown manila envelope.

After five laps, Kevin exited the pool, casually walked over to the table, and leaned in. Water dripped and splashed onto the resealed brown envelope; it also splashed onto Mr. Trask's arm.

"You should have showered before you used the pool," Mr. Trask said, flipping over the now soggy, folded newspaper.

"Oh, sorry," replied Kevin, taking the towel from the back of the chair. "Anyway, what's the deal with needing a tennis partner? Why don't you stand your ground and have Mom play?"

"Mr. Kung Meng and Myung Chan won't play against a woman! It's something they don't do in Asia."

"You should remind Mr. Kung Meng and his partner that they're not in their country. Have Mom on the court; if they forfeit, that's their problem."

"Kevin, I don't feel like arguing. I need you to play this morning, and that is that!"

"Okay, but I don't get it. You're treating this Mr. Kung Meng as if he's God. Is it that important to open a manufacturing facility overseas? Is that why you're kissing his butt?"

"Kevin, you're not seeing the whole picture. I'll bring you up to speed after you settle into your office over the next few weeks."

"Dad, we've had this discussion before. I do not want to start with my own office. I'm starting on the assembly line or the loading dock."

"Kevin, I'm not in the mood to listen to your work yourself up through the ranks crap. Save that socialistic college rhetoric for your professors."

"Who's talking?" Kevin blurted out. "I'm not the one trying to cut a deal with a communist. I'm sure Mr. Meng pays top dollars to all the plant workers in Korea or China, wherever he can find cheap or free labor." Kevin swallowed hard. "Socialism beats communism any day of the week!"

Mr. Trask dropped the wet newspaper onto the table, picked up the large manila envelope, and stood up. Although he was a head shorter than Kevin, his dominance was overbearing. "Be at the club by nine! We will be playing on the inside courts. I expect you to show Mr. Meng and Myung Chan respect!"

Kevin tossed the wet towel onto the table, walked to the pool's edge, and dove in. He swam to the deep end and let himself sink to the bottom. The bright early-morning sun was magnified and reflected off the aqua sidewalls like flashing mirrors. The weightlessness and the silence made for a mere thirty seconds of peace and tranquility. Kevin pushed off the bottom of the pool. When he surfaced, Mr. Trask hastily walked across the lush green lawn toward the six-car garage. There was a set of stairs outside the garage, up to the guest house, where Kevin had moved since coming home from college. Kevin wanted privacy, as did Tina; she was waiting in the shower.

Chlorine pool water was still dripping when Kevin scrambled up the stairs, two at a time. Steam rolled out into the cool morning air when he opened the guestroom door. Tina stuck her head out and around the bathroom door. "Kevin, I hope you don't mind. You got me all dirty, so I'm using your shower."

"No, not a problem," Kevin said as he stepped inside the guestroom. "Throw me a dry towel from the rack," Kevin said, pulling clothes out of a Gucci duffel bag on the floor.

"Come over here, Kevin. I'll dry you off," Tina replied as she stood at the bathroom door with a towel wrapped around her waist.

From his squatted position, Kevin turned and looked up at Tina. Her skin was flawless; the white towel stood out against her dark tan. There was no tan line over her perfect breasts, thanks to umpteen tanning sessions and the best elective surgery money could buy. Kevin took a long look and smiled. This fun, sensual moment seemed harmless and inviting. But then. Kevin flashed back to the time he skinny-dipped and what Grandpa Trask had done to him many years ago. "I need to find my tennis racket!" Kevin quickly turned his head away and started digging in the closet.

The prototype Mercedes SL600 fit in well with all the other high-end luxury cars in the Pasadena Country Club parking lot. Kevin's baggy sweats and grubby athletic shirt did not. The receptionist at the front counter gave Kevin the once-over while he signed in. She would have reminded them of the dress code if it were anyone else.

The Trask name on the tennis court reservation list kept her lips sealed.

The last time Kevin signed in, he was a sophomore at Duke; he glanced around, and nothing had changed. The open-air lounge was packed with the world's most privileged individuals. Three synthetic women next to the Grecian fountains on the edge of their chairs picked at Caesar salads and fresh fruit. They looked like mannequins, sitting tall with their chests pushed up and out by Victoria's Secret. Other members were displaying the latest trends in sportswear and designer sunglasses. The din of conversations rarely drifted outside the world of who was who or who was doing what to whom.

To the right, behind a Plexiglas wall, were rows of machines getting used by privileged members. Some were reading books, and others were watching CNN on the overhead monitors. In the back corner, a vigorous runner clipped at full speed on a treadmill. Hoping to reach some self-induced escape and temporary release from her demanding multi-dating lifestyle.

Kevin felt a few eyes following him as he walked toward the locker room. The grubbiness was his statement, meaningless yet somewhat meaningful. It did not matter what Kevin did or was wearing; his family's status would let him get away with anything—probably even murder. The Trask family was one of the founders and wealthiest members of the Pasadena Country Club. They had earned their pedestal among the highest in the place once known as the town of the Queen of the Angels.

Kevin pulled off his baggy sweats inside the locker room and retrieved a pair of white tennis shorts from his sports bag. The wrinkled polo shirt was a private-label item that would get him onto the tennis courts without complaints from the style police. Sitting on the oak bench, he rubbed at the dried-out leather of his four-hundred-dollar court shoes. *These are stiff. How long has it been since I've played? Last summer? No, it must have been the summer before. I went to a basketball camp in Europe that summer. Oh well… I just want to get this game over with.*

Pulling his racket from the side pouch of the sports bag, Kevin gave it a few swings through the balm-scented air of the locker room. The stiffness in his elbow immediately flared from all the years of adolescent tennis lessons, which were before basketball became the number one sport in his life. Kevin hustled to the inside courts and checked a clipboard hung on the fence. Mr. Robert Trask was in the reservation spot for court three. Kevin looked across the expansive, climate-controlled facility; Court Three was empty.

He grabbed a bucket of yellow tennis balls from a rack next to a ball machine and headed to the court. He slipped through the green canvas curtains that separated each court and went to the

serving line to practice. After half of the balls were gone, his arm was loose, and his bullet-like serve fell into a groove. From the second-floor bleachers, the club pro observed and recalled all the lessons he had given Kevin years ago. Kevin noticed Derrick Agisee and pointed with the tennis racket. The seasoned veteran gave Kevin the thumbs-up.

Kevin was picking up the balls from the far side of the court when the green canvas curtains parted. Mr. Trask escorted two Asian men to the center of the court. "Kevin, get over here and meet Mr. Kung Meng and Myung Chan."

Kevin trotted over to the net. "Good morning," Kevin quipped, glaring intensely at the elder Asian.

"And this is Myung Chan." Mr. Trask now motioned toward a much younger and taller man standing behind the group. Myung Chan instinctively offered the customary Korean bow.

"Nice to meet you two guys," replied Kevin while mentally sizing up the competition. "Do you guys need to warm up? I've already had a chance to hit half a bucket."

"No, thank you. Mr. Junior, Kevin Trask," replied Mr. Meng in broken words, followed by a returned intimidating glare before he turned and spoke in Chinese to his partner.

Myung Chan looked toward Kevin and Robert. "Mr. Meng says may the best side or country win. Whatever the American saying is." They both bowed in unison.

"May the best team win is the saying," Kevin replied, standing tall and not yielding to an uncustomary bowing.

Robert Trask returned the bow to Mr. Meng and the younger Mr. Myung Chan. "Yes, may the best team win." Mr. Trask said with phony respect.

Kevin still refused to bow; he just turned and walked over to the side of the court. While digging through his athletic bag for a sweatband, Mr. Trask approached him. "Kevin, you don't call these men 'guys.' You call them by their last names."

Kevin looked up. "What's with you, with the bowing and all? What do you want me to do, kiss ass like you?"

"Kevin, just do this," Robert Trask replied in a low, stern voice. "While you have been away at college, the business climate has changed. We must partner with overseas companies to remain competitive. Outsourcing is the business model for all future manufacturing plants in the U.S."

"Overseas partners, outsourcing! What are you talking about?" Kevin looked up. "Grandpa would roll over in his grave." He turned his attention away from digging around in the bag to Mr. Chan and Mr. Meng, now on the court, swinging their rackets and loosening up.

"Kevin, lower your voice. Times are different, unlike when your grandfather was running the business. I said I'll fill you in when you start work. Let's play tennis." Mr. Trask replied in a rigid tone as he walked off.

Mr. Meng and Mr. Chan had already started to volley back and forth. Mr. Meng was older than everyone. He was stocky, had a strong forehand, and wore his black hair in a military flattop. Myung Chan was older and taller than Kevin. He had a powerful tennis swing, and his natural athleticism was apparent. Moreover, he was a skilled competitor who would do whatever it took to win.

Kevin sized up the opposition. *Mr. Meng is about as good as Dad. But Myung is quick and lean. His serve is strong, but his backhand is weak.*

Robert Trask had gone to the back of the court and was doing deep knee bends and squats. His focus was not on the game. It was about building a partnership and securing a $66 million investment.

After about five minutes of swinging rackets, loosening up, and mentally sizing each other, it was time. The Trask team lost the coin toss. Mr. Meng spoke to Myung Chan in Chinese as they took their positions. Mr. Meng was to serve first.

Kevin switched positions with his father so that the older men would serve each other. Mr. Meng's first serve was out of bounds. The second serve was an ace! The following two serves were returned long and out of bounds by Trask Senior. Mr. Meng served another ace. The first game went to the Asian team. Kevin had yet to touch the ball. Robert Trask was a poor server. They also lost the second game.

Now, Myung Chan was serving to Kevin. His first serve was like a bullet; Kevin returned it as hard, and they had their first point. Kevin returned the next two serves for points, and the score was now one game to two. Mr. Kung Meng looked over his shoulder and yelled something at Myung Chan in Chinese. Myung Chan adjusted; he started returning everything to Trask Senior. Kevin was being kept out of the game. The strategy worked; they lost the first set.

When it was Kevin's turn to serve, he slammed two aces at Myung Chan. The third serve got returned, and Kevin volleyed the ball back to Mr. Meng. There was a slight cheer from some of the gathered spectators. Kevin fired the next point directly at Mr. Meng's ankles and smirked when Mr. Meng had to jump out of the way. Redemption was all over Kevin's face as he gave a 'two-can-play-your-game' stare toward Myung Chan.

Mr. Trask walked toward Kevin, keeping his back to their opponents. "This is supposed to be a friendly match. Don't turn it into a battle."

"Tell that to Myung Chan!" Kevin said while pointing with his racquet across the court. "He's the one who started playing to you. I only hit the ball four times in the first three games."

"Kevin, back off and show some respect!" Mr. Trask demanded.

The veins bulged in Kevin's neck; he started tapping his tennis racquet on the green court floor. Mr. Trask turned, waved across the court, then took up his position. Kevin served the first ball long—intentionally. Mr. Trask glanced back over his shoulder with a sign of approval. After a few deep breaths, Kevin tossed the ball high. *Twang* echoed off the racket strings; his second serve was an ace! More spectators gathered as the game's intensity increased. The club pro had come downstairs and slipped through the green canvas onto the side court. About five minutes later, Mrs. Trask appeared and stood beside the club pro. It took a grueling, hard-played hour for Kevin to get them at one game apiece.

Several times, Mr. Meng and Myung Chan conversed in Chinese, switching strategies during the game. Mr. Meng called for a time-out and huddled with Myung Chan at the back of their court.

Mr. Trask walked back to Kevin. "What is your problem? You are acting like this is for the Olympic gold."

"Those guys cheat; two serves were foot faults in the last set. Myung Chan plays to you constantly. But I've found my groove. If we…"

Mr. Trask interrupted their conversation by putting his hand on Kevin's sweaty shoulder and squeezing hard. "You are making this out to be more than a game. Lighten up, Kevin!"

"It is more than a game, and we can win! It's my turn to serve. I can..."

Mr. Trask squeezed harder. "Kevin, if you had played this hard on the basketball court, you would have been an MVP. It's not the time to grow a set of balls."

Kevin twisted away from under his father's grip. "Get off my case! We're playing tennis, not basketball." Kevin stomped off toward the opening in the green canvas court curtains. A hush fell over the entire indoor tennis facility. The intensity was immense. The club pro leaned over and whispered to Mrs. Trask, "Do you think your son will forfeit the game?"

Throughout her years on the pro circuit, Linda never forfeited a tennis match. She rushed through the court curtains and caught up to Kevin. The spectators from the bleachers could see they were having an intense conversation. Mrs. Trask returned to her position, standing silently beside the club pro. It seemed like an eternity—Kevin finally returned.

The battle continued, five sets to four in the final game; Kevin was serving. Everyone, even the players on the other courts, had stopped playing and went up to the spectators' seats. Kevin threw

the ball high; his racquet whizzed as it cut through the air. Then there was that all-telling *twang* of hitting the racquet's sweet spot. The ball rocketed toward Myung Chan's feet. It was an ace! Three more points and they would win the match. Kevin raised his racket and let out a victory yelp, "Yes!" Clapping filled the indoor courts.

The celebration was short-lived. Mr. Meng pointed just past the line, indicating the ball was long. Myung Chan said something to him in Chinese and shook his head. Mr. Meng was now pointing to a spot further past the line, rubbing his racquet on the court to make a mark. "Far long, far long, far long, he yelled in broken English."

Myung Chan spoke again in Chinese, and then Mr. Meng started yelling, "Out long, out long. We win the point!"

Kevin sprinted from the back of the court, jumped the net, and pointed to a spot where the ball had hit. "The ball was inside the line! It hit right here!"

Kevin turned toward the club pro. "You saw it. Was it in?"

From the get-go, the club pro could tell that Robert Trask was uninterested in winning. It seemed as if Mr. Trask was throwing the game. "I didn't see if the ball was in or out."

The crowd started to chant, "In—In—In."

"I think it was out," yelled Robert.

Mrs. Trask's head immediately jerked toward Robert. Linda knew that he knew that the ball was in. The adrenaline was rushing, but it was not worth the abuse if she went against her husband. Every ounce of her competitive body flexed, like a lioness ready to protect her cub—it took everything for her to hold back.

"Okay, we'll play the point over." Kevin offered. Confident that they could win. Kevin served and then rushed the net. He returned the ball to Mr. Meng. "Fifteen love!" Kevin yipped.

The following serve was in. Kevin felt a blast above his left eye while rushing toward the net. His racket slid across the court when he dropped to his knees! Blood immediately gushed from his forehead. The crowd went silent. The club pro rushed to Kevin's aid. Mrs. Trask glared at Mr. Trask for the wild backhand swing.

"We are the winners. China's victory." Mr. Meng chanted in broken English.

Mr. Trask walked to the net. "Good match," he said, extending his hand to Mr. Meng.

"Good game! What are you talking about?" Kevin protested. "I can still play."

"I don't think so," the club pro said to Kevin while holding the gash above his eye closed. "I hope you don't have HIV," the pro whispered to Kevin.

"What?" Kevin eyed the club pro.

"With the Arthur Ashe story all over the news, I have to ask."

Kevin's mind jumped from Arthur Ashe to Magic Johnson. He had recently announced that he was quitting basketball after testing HIV positive.

Myung Chan and Hung Meng argued in Chinese.

Chan swallowed, hesitated, and said, "It is a forfeit." He extended a handshake to Kevin.

"I can still play. We only need to finish this set."

Mr. Meng pointed at the blood now dripping onto Kevin's shirt and backed up. The crowd was still in a hush. "No play. No play. Danger! We win…"

Mrs. Trask grabbed a white athletic towel and rushed to Kevin. "Here, apply pressure to that cut."

"Thanks, Mom." Kevin put the towel on his forehead. "We only need two more points to win the set. Then it's my serve."

"Kevin, I can't let the game go on. The blood and the liability." The club pro was now staring at his own hands.

Kevin stomped off! Linda Trask looked over at Robert and then down at Kevin's racket lying by the net. She went over, picked up the racket, and said, "I'll finish the game!"

Mr. Trask replied, "No, it's a forfeit."

The crowd's applause drowned out Robert's words to forfeit the game, and the chanting overcame the clapping. "Let her play! Let her play! Let her play."

Across the net, Mr. Meng and Myung Chan had a heated discussion in Chinese. Mr. Meng wanted to accept the forfeit, but Myung Chan explained that Americans hardly ever forfeit.

Mrs. Trask walked to the serving line and bounced the ball, ready to resume that set. Most of the spectators were now yelling, "Let Linda play! Let Linda play."

The club pro was giving the crowd a thumbs-up, inciting them. Kevin had come back through the court curtains. Myung Chan moved into position to receive the serve.

A hush of silence fell over the court. Linda tossed the tennis ball high and hit it with her near 100mph serve—it went long. The silence continued. Her second serve was even more brutal, near Myung Chan's feet.

"Ace!" someone yelled from the crowd.

The Club-Pro rolled a ball to Linda. She nodded at Myung Chan. Her serve was hard and again right at his feet. Another Ace! The crowd went wild. The following serve, Myung returned too high. Linda charged the net and swung overhead. The ball landed directly before Mr. Meng and bounced into his flabby gut. The match was all tied up. The crowd was ecstatic. Mr. Meng stood rigid. Myung Chan was dazed, and Kevin smiled from the side of the court while holding a white towel to the gash on his forehead.

Mr. Trask walked back to the serving line. "Throw the game. Let them win," he demanded with a solid glare into Linda's eyes.

Mr. Meng was demanding the opposite from Myung Chan. In Chinese, he ordered. "Win this match, or your family will get exiled to a labor camp! Do not let a woman disgrace our country."

"Play the game! Play the game! Play the game." The crowd yelled in unison. There was more electricity in the air than when Linda was captain of the U.S. tennis team playing for the Federation Cup in South Africa.

Myung Chan took the serving position—the threat to win was genuine. He slammed the first serve hard. Linda returned the ball, hitting Meng in the thigh. He dropped his racket while the crowd jeered and laughed. Mr. Meng yelled in broken English, "We cannot end game. Women not allowed to play. You lose by forfeit."

Robert quickly walked around the net and held his hand out to Chun Meng. "Good game." There was silence; nobody could believe what was happening. Robert performed a half-bow toward Mr. Kung Meng.

Kevin felt punched in the gut. The crowd jeered in disbelief. The club pro shook his head and left the court with his hand on Kevin's shoulder. Hissing turned to booing! Mr. Meng turned toward Linda, anticipating that she would bow in defeat. The booing and shouting grew louder! Someone in the crowd threw a knotted towel onto the court, a crumpled paper cup followed, and then a water bottle.

Myung Chan walked over to Mrs. Trask, took her hand, and shook it. "Good game." Then he whispered, "I know you could have defeated us." He stepped back and gave a respectable bow to Linda. This simple gesture could cost Mr. Myung the hand he held the tennis racket with—if he were back home in North Korea.

Kevin yanked off his wet, sweaty shirt inside the locker room and threw it against the lockers. He plopped down on one of the oak benches, bent over, and started untying his shoe.

Mr. Trask burst through the heavy locker room door! "What the hell were you and your mother trying to do?" Robert Trask yelled.

"What were we doing?" Kevin yelled back. "The tiebreaker should have been played. But you let them win by some disgusting made-up forfeit!"

"Kevin, it was supposed to be a friendly game. Good sportsmanship was the objective. You must tell Mr. Chun Meng and Myung they played a good game." Mr. Trask moved across the locker room toward Kevin.

"I'm not going out there and kiss ass like you. That bowing thing almost made me puke!"

With one swift motion, Robert backhanded Kevin! "Kevin, you need to grow up!" Blood oozed from Kevin's lip.

Caught off guard, Kevin jumped up and doubled up his fist. *I should kick his ass, just for Mom's sake*. Kevin held back—aware not to push Robert further.

"Kevin, I'm sorry! So much is happening at work. I need Mr. Meng's financial backing..." Robert Trask took a deep breath. "I'm probably going to have to terminate Richard Johnson on Monday!" Another deep breath. "We have the lawsuit, and the union wants more concessions. There might be a strike!" Mr. Trask was rambling as he wiped Kevin's blood on his hand.

Kevin was looking in the mirror while dabbing at the blood on his swelling lip. He immediately turned and prepared for a real battle. "Terminate Richard Johnson? What the hell are you talking about?"

Mr. Trask looked up. "Richard has been having an affair. I just got proof this morning. Photographs from a security camera at Holiday Inn."

"So, what if Richard is having an affair! What business is it of Trask Enterprise? You don't know what he's been going through since Jabbar got shot and all."

"Richard is having an affair with the auditor they hired to review the Trask corporate records. He might disclose the pending lawsuit or inform her of the pending employee buyout. I can't take the risk."

"What lawsuit? What employee buy-out? Who are they?" Kevin wanted answers.

"Kung Meng and his investors." Mr. Trask took a long, deep breath and gathered his composure. "Kevin, take three weeks off and have fun with Tina and your friends. Richard will be gone before you get back."

"If Richard gets terminated, I'm not coming to work! Sure, he might not be up to speed since Jabbar's murder. But fire him at this time in his life. Who knows what he would do to himself?"

"Kevin granted, things are a mess for the Johnsons, but life goes on," Robert replied with a stone-cold tone. "That's why I need you to buck up. After Condi converted, the Johnsons are living a personal crusade."

"Converted? What do you mean?" Kevin asked while checking to see if the blood from his lip had stopped.

"It's that Muslim against Christian doctrine that Richard started preaching after Jabbar died." Robert paused. "Take off the three weeks. We'll talk when you come on board with the new team."

"On board with the new team?" Kevin put the towel back up to his split lip. "I'm afraid to ask who the new players are."

"At least they're not Christian nor Muslim."

"Dad, it sounds like you are crawling into a dark, deep hole." Kevin's tone turned from disagreement to concern.

"Kevin, this isn't college or some abstract belief system. It is business in the real world. It's about money and world power." Mr. Trask spoke as though he were giving a pep talk. "Wait until you study Mr. Meng's business plan. He knows how to help the working class get back on track and become productive again. He is a skilled commerce leader."

"What the hell is Mr. Meng to the Trask Corporation business plan? Dad, you are scaring me." Kevin's voice was shaky.

"Well, his business plan includes sixty-six million dollars for us!"

The door to the locker room opened, and Myung Chan spoke. "Mr. Meng would like to buy the two of you a victory drink. How long should I tell him?" Myung Chan took a few steps forward, and the heavy door automatically closed. "It is a custom in our countries that the winner pays for the victory drink."

Something came over Kevin, sending a chill up his spine. Like a soldier ready to battle, Kevin stood face to face with Myung Chan. "Tell Mr. Kung Meng that he is not in his country. Tell him he is in the United States of America--the nation under God..."

Expressionless and on notice, Myung Chan turned and left the locker room.

"Damn you, Kevin!" yelled Robert Trask as he rushed out of the locker room.

Chap 2——————Spend the night

Kevin left the Pasadena Country Club with a gash on his forehead, a split lip, and no shower. *Crap, this traffic is backed up. There must have been a serious accident. I hope nobody died.* Running the air-conditioning was ineffective in the blistering noon sun with the convertible top down. In addition to the exhaust fumes, traffic noise, and problems at Trask corporate, Kevin was more than ready to get out of LA.

He flipped open the top of a black nylon bag, revealing a phone inside. He placed the handset between his ear and shoulder and punched the keypad inside the canvas bag.

A feminine "Hello" came over the handset. "Is this you, Kevin? All I can hear is freeway noise."

"Yes, it's me. I'm calling from that bag-phone in my new car."

"That's so cool to have a phone in a car," replied Tina in an upbeat tone.

"I've been thinking about what you said about getting a private houseboat just for the two of us at Shasta Lake." Kevin paused, waiting for a response.

"Like, that would be so cool," Tina excitedly replied. "Just the two of us all alone?"

"Yeah, just us two… Let's do it today!"

"Today, but like… Like, I'm getting my hair trimmed and nails done this afternoon. Can we leave tomorrow?"

"I need to get away now! I don't want to be home with my dad. We just had a blowout at the club."

"A blowout? Like, that's not good. He's not going to take back the car, is he?"

"Screw the car. We had a big disagreement. He even took a swing at me!"

"Really? Like, what happened? Like, do you want to meet to talk about it after my hair appointment?" Tina rattled on.

"No, I want to get away right after I pick up a few things from the guesthouse. Let's leave for the lake ASAP to get there before dark."

"Ah... I have a tanning session after my hair appointment. I can't go to the lake looking like a bleached-out tourist. Plus, I have to pack." Tina paused for a few more seconds. "Kevin, why don't you spend the night over here, and we'll leave tomorrow?"

"Up yours!" yelled Kevin.

"Are you talking to me?" Tina asked.

"Sorry, some jerk just cut in front of me." Kevin's mind shifted to earlier that day. "Your tan looks fine. I noticed this morning. You don't even have a tan line."

"I didn't think you noticed. Like, you rushed out of the guest house so fast."

"Believe me, I noticed." A smile overcame Kevin's road rage scowl. "So, let's head to Shasta Lake. It'll be our first time. Do you know what I mean?"

"Yes, I know what you mean. But I can't go to the lake looking like a total loser. Like, my hair and nails need to get done. Plus, touching up my tan makes me look better naked. Just plan to come down to San Diego later." Tina paused. "I'm inviting you to spend the night."

"What about your parents?"

"It'll be okay with them. They like your family."

"My family? They only met my parents at a few basketball games."

"Yeah, but it's the Trask family," Tina replied.

Kevin removed the handset from his ear and shoulder and stared through the windshield. The guy who had just cut him off was edging out someone else two cars ahead. Brake lights flashed, tires squealed, and horns blared! The bumper-to-bumper traffic halted.

"Kevin, are you there? Can you hear me? Did that phone in a bag go dead?"

Kevin put the handset back up to his head. "Tina, I've got to get out of here, now! I'll call you from my parents' home. I need a shower and to pack a few things."

"You can take a shower over here. I'll join you. Like I was going to do this morning."

"What about your parents?" Kevin asked.

"I told you, they like you. It's no big deal to them."

"Ah… I'll call you later." Kevin switched off the phone and tossed the corded handset onto the passenger seat. He pushed his head back against the leather headrest and closed his eyes. *Damn*

it, most guys would be rushing over to be with Tina. She's so hot and willing. Why'd Grandpa Trask mess me up? I will probably never be normal. If only he had not made me…

"Move it, you rich asshole!" A deep, heavy voice came from behind, followed by a ten-second horn blast.

Kevin snapped out of his daydream and looked in the rearview mirror. A big biker-type was giving Kevin the finger from a jacked-up old four-wheel drive pickup truck. Kevin looked ahead; the traffic had moved about twenty feet. His knuckles turned white as he clenched the steering wheel, moving a short distance before he had to stop again. It was an hour and twenty-five minutes in LA traffic hell before Kevin returned to the guest house. He rang up the intercom to the main house and asked Maria to call Tina while he showered and packed. The shower stall was still wet, and Kevin could smell the perfume from earlier that day. He picked up a damp towel and buried his nose in it. Tina's scent was intoxicating.

As Kevin was hurrying up and down the outside stairs on the side of the six-car garage, Maria came out of the main mansion with a brown paper sack. She had been watching Kevin on the security monitor and knew he was in a rush. Maria hurried across the cobblestones toward Kevin and yelled. "Mr. Trask, I packed you a lunch!"

With his hand ready to shut the trunk, he stopped. "Marie, I told you to call me Kevin."

Marie hurried the ten more feet and held out the brown paper bag. "I'm sorry, but it's not proper."

Kevin slammed the trunk lid. "Did you get a hold of Tina?"

"No, Mr. Tra__," Maria paused. "No, Kevin. I had to leave three messages on Ms. Williams' answering machine. I left Ms. Tina messages saying you were in a hurry. I gave her the number for the new phone in your car."

"That's weird. We talked forty-five minutes ago," Kevin replied.

"I can keep trying to call her," replied Marie, concealing the brown sack lunch behind her.

Kevin opened the driver's door and looked back at Maria. "Don't bother; I'll try getting a hold of her." Kevin returned to Maria and stated, "I almost forgot my lunch."

Maria smiled, pulled the sack lunch from behind her back, and handed it to Kevin. "I made you a peanut butter and jelly sandwich with crunchy peanut butter. And put in two bananas that are not too ripe, just like you like them. I also hid some of those Twinkies in there. The kind that Mrs. Trask never let you have."

Kevin took the sack and smiled. "Did you put in one of those chocolate milks I wasn't supposed to have?"

"No, I forgot." Marie quietly replied, realizing how many years had passed since she had packed a lunch for Kevin.

Kevin hugged Marie awkwardly and put the lunch behind the passenger seat. He was still a child in many ways. Sexually, he was not as experienced as Maria had been way back when she packed his lunches for middle school.

As Kevin approached Interstate 5, the amber highway sign blinked, and the words, '**I-5 south closed 4 miles ahead'**. "Crap!" Kevin blurted into the smothering smog and hung a U-turn. *I'll have to take the 405.*

He tried to call Tina back for ten minutes, dwelling on the agonizing drive south to San Diego to pick her up. He hoped the I-405 would not be as packed. The thought of being with Tina while her parents were there was something he wasn't quite sure of. The words, *'They like your family,'* played repeatedly in his head.

As he approached the 405 south, the traffic was also stop-and-go. With one glance in the rearview mirror, he darted over three lanes and took the 405 north toward Sacramento*. There is no way I want to spend four hours going down to San Diego. Tina had stuff to do anyhow. I'll fly her up to Shasta Lake. There has to be an airport in Redding.*

Thirty miles north of Los Angeles, the traffic lightened. Kevin took a deep, relaxing breath and sucked in the liberation from the largest city on the West Coast. The V12 engine purred under the hood, and the six-speaker sound system blasted Rock and Roll while the warm wind gently kneaded Kevin's auburn hair. His tennis elbow ached as he punched on a tiny keypad: **Redding, California**. The prototype dash GPS flashed, and the blue display changed to **MPH**. Kevin punched in **85**. The blue display changed and read **ETA-9:22 PM.**

It was dark when Kevin pulled into the Shasta Lake resort. He parked, pressed the automatic top button, set the alarm, and began crossing the parking lot. As Kevin approached the dock, he could barely read the sign hanging over the walkway: BRIDGE BAY MARINA IS OPEN FROM 9:00 AM TO **9:00 PM.**

Kevin noticed someone with a flashlight by the gas pumps on the dock. The wooden planks bounced as Kevin hurried down the walkway toward the moving ray of light. The silhouetted shadow turned and pointed the flashlight toward Kevin. "We're closed."

"I know. I saw the sign. I'll pay double if I can rent a houseboat tonight."

The man shone the light directly into Kevin's face. "That wouldn't do you any good. You can't operate a houseboat on the lake after dusk."

"Oh," replied Kevin while using his hand to block the beam from the flashlight.

"Plus, if you don't have a reservation, all the boats are spoken for."

"We got reservations. I'm with the Duke Basketball team. The 'Blue Devils'. I think we have two or three boats reserved."

"Yeah, but..." The silhouetted man scratched at his head. "I think you are a couple of days early. Let's go check."

Kevin followed the man down the dock toward two buildings: a small office and a large, white, plywood-sided slip with an aluminum roof, where boats were repaired. The man opened the glass door and flipped the switch to turn on the light. It took a moment for Kevin's eyes to adjust. The office was no bigger than a small bedroom; it had a tall counter and a large chalkboard on the back wall. The man went behind the counter, retrieved a brown accordion-style file holder from below, and placed it on top of the counter. "You said Duke?" he asked as his finger found the **D** index tab.

"Yeah, I mean yes, Sir. There should be two or three houseboats reserved." Kevin said, moving closer to read the name on Hank's coveralls. "Hank, I think you're right. I might be a day or so early. But I'll pay double the rate to get a boat early."

Hank plopped down the **D** folder on the counter and found the reservation. "You are two days early. There's a note here indicating that your group now requires two additional boats. There's nothing about renting a boat two days early. It might be a little crowded for your group, but all I could get for your group is four boats, possibly five."

"How crowded is that going to be?" Kevin asked in a concerned tone.

"Three boats sleep eight, and the other one sleeps six."

"Oh," Kevin paused. "Do you have anything I could rent just for myself?"

"Not a thing, son," replied Hank, putting the file back under the counter. "It's the height of our summer season."

"How about something just for two? I'd pay double the summer rate."

Hank turned around and looked at a maintenance schedule on a chalkboard. "I could let you have the Stargazer. The galley refrigerator isn't working, but there is a small refrigerator in the captain's room."

"If it has one working frig, I'll take it. Like I said…"

Hank interrupted, "Yeah, I know. You'll pay double," Hank pulled out a contract. "The Stargazer rents for nineteen hundred dollars a week or three hundred dollars daily?"

"That sounds reasonable. I'll take it. Privacy is important this week." Kevin thought about Tina. "Can you bill me?"

"Do you mean like on a charge card?" asked Hank, reaching under the counter.

"Yes, just bill our company."

"Look, son," Hank said, adding a stern look. "What's your name, anyway?"

"Kevin."

"Look, Kevin… I don't like renting my boats to college kids. They all pool their money together, and when there is damage, I can never collect. I'm sorry, but I will not be able to bill you or any members of your party. As a matter of fact, I need to collect a deposit."

"Hank, I understand," Kevin replied in a reassuring tone. "I give you my word that if there is any damage. I will personally pay for it."

"Sorry, Kevin, but I've just been burned by too many college kids."

"Okay, that's not a problem," Kevin said. "I'll have my girlfriend bring cash tomorrow. I got some cash in the car for the deposit. I'll go get my wallet." Kevin turned to start for his wallet.

"Hold on," ordered Hank. "It's late! We'll settle up tomorrow."

"Sounds good," replied Kevin, then casually asked. "Where's the closest place to get a room for tonight?"

"You'll probably have to drive into Redding," Hank said, turning out the light and pushing Kevin out of the office. "You might have difficulty finding a room on a Saturday night."

"Thanks for all your help. I'll be back tomorrow to rent the Stargazer." Kevin said as he headed for the parking lot.

Hank saw Kevin halfway up the wooden-planked walkway as he locked the door. "Hold on!"

Kevin stopped on the walkway and waited. The wooden planks bounced as Hank walked up toward Kevin. "You'll never get a room in Redding tonight. It's the height of the tourist season. You can sleep on the Stargazer."

"That'd be great. I'm beat from playing tennis and then driving all afternoon."

"You can't be underway on the lake at night. It's against the law. I'll pull her out of the slip and put you at the end of the dock. It'll be nice and quiet till morning."

"Hank, I would appreciate that. I'll go get a few things and lock up my car." Kevin hurried up the walkway and toward the Mercedes SL600.

It took about ten minutes for Hank to pull the Stargazer from the slip and tie her up at the end of the dock. Kevin returned with an overnight bag in one hand and a sleeping bag in the other.

Hank tied the last rope to the dock cleat and stood up. "There you go. She's all yours."

Kevin dropped the sleeping bag and then pulled out six one-hundred-dollar bills. "Here's for tonight."

"Six hundred dollars." Hank counted the money again. "I'm not charging you to sleep tonight at the dock. I'll get the refrigerator fixed up in the morning. The rent starts after the repair, at three hundred a day."

"Okay, give me a total in the morning."

Hank yawned. "We'll figure it out later. I want to get home; it's been a long, hard day." Hank pushed the money into his pocket.

"Thanks," Kevin replied, bending to pick up the sleeping bag.

"From the cut above your eye and your split lip. I hope you got the best of the other guy." Hank turned and walked off into the night.

Kevin went aboard and did a quick walk around. He unrolled his sleeping bag on one of the cushioned benches on the top deck. The water lapped against the aluminum pontoons, playing a soothing melody. The night air was motionless and eighty-plus degrees. Kevin looked toward the star-filled sky with his hands folded behind his head. His early morning run, the tennis debacle, and the long drive were all coming due. Kevin counted shooting stars before dreaming about being as one with Tina.

The distant drone of an outboard motor woke Kevin. A deep blue morning sky greeted his squinting eyes. When he rolled onto his side, his eyes focused down through the canyon walls and adjusted on a diehard water skier already on the glass-like water. The water spray glistened in the rising sun's rays as the skier cut from side to side. Just beyond the skier was a lone fisherman casting from a rock outcropping. Sitting up, Kevin felt stiffness in his shoulder and a sore tennis elbow. The bump on his forehead and the fat lip was still swollen.

Standing at the railing, Kevin looked over the forty-foot houseboat when a teenage boy came out of the office and yelled down the dock, "Sir! Are you Mr. Kevin Trask?"

"Yeah, that's me," Kevin yelled back.

"Sir, you've already had three calls since I came to work. I think it's important, or there's an emergency or something!" The teenage boy began jogging toward the Stargazer.

Kevin hurried down from the upper deck to the second level, then to the main deck, leaped onto the dock, and met the frail, hairless teenage boy.

"Emergency! Who, what? My parents?"

"I don't know! If it's an emergency, you can call back from the marina office."

Kevin followed the young boy back to the office. The message on the chalkboard caught Kevin's attention: **VERY IMPORTANT! HAVE KEVIN TRASK CALL 918-330- 4221. DRIVING NEW SILVER MERCEDES CONVERTIBLE. HE IS A DUKE BASKETBALL TEAM PLAYER.**

Kevin punched in the numbers on the telephone hanging on the wall next to the chalkboard. "Tina, is there an emergency?"

"Why didn't you call me back yesterday?" Tina asked in a pissed-off tone.

"I tried! Marie also left three messages on your home answering machine. I-5 south was blocked. I even tried the four-o-five. You weren't home!"

There was a long pause. "Oh… I went shopping after we talked." Another pause. "I thought you said you'd be here to spend the night at my house. I bought something sexy to sleep in." Tina's pissed-off tone turned to flirting.

"Tina, I wasn't sure about an overnighter at your parents' house. I'd feel uncomfortable, or just funny, or something."

"Don't be such a prude, Kevin. I showed them what I bought to sleep in. My stepfather said it was super sexy. They even had me model it."

"What?" Kevin asked in a perplexed tone.

"Yeah, they both liked it, and so will you," Tina replied. "Anyway, when will you come back to pick me up?" Tina asked in a seductive voice.

"Tina, that's a long drive. Can't you drive up here or catch a ride with someone?"

"No one is leaving till Monday. You need to come back and pick me up!" Tina demanded and then switched back to her seductive voice. "Then we can be all alone tonight… It'll be just the two of us."

"Tina, how about if I have Condi arrange a flight into Redding?"

"Sir, this phone is for emergencies and business only," the boy interrupted.

"Tina, I have to go. If I can get a signal, I'll call you back on that phone in my car."

"Sorry, sir," the teenage dock boy apologized.

When Kevin hung up the wall telephone, a message on the chalkboard caught his eye. **MR. CHAN WANTS TO RENT ANYTHING. SKI BOAT, FISHING BOAT, YACHT. CALL BACK 514-213-5412**

"Thanks for using the phone," Kevin said, still examining the message on the board. "This Mr. Chan, did he have a first name?" Kevin asked, pointing at the chalkboard.

"I cannot say, Sir. Those are our valued customers. We don't give out any personal information," sounded off the young boy.

"Did you take the message? Can you at least tell me when the message got taken?"

"Sorry, Mr. Trask. I cannot give out that information. Those are our valued customers." The teenager echoed again.

"Okay," Kevin casually replied as he mentally noted the phone number.

At the top of the walkway, Kevin looked to the far-right corner of the parking lot where the SL600 Mercedes was parked; to his left was a small restaurant. "I'm getting a cup of coffee before I call Tina back," Kevin mumbled.

The screen door slapped shut as Kevin headed for the counter. "Could I borrow a pen?" Kevin asked the waitress behind the yellow Formica counter.

The waitress tossed a pencil from behind her ear on the counter. "Will this work?" she asked, then parted through the metal swinging kitchen doors.

Kevin took a napkin from the chrome napkin holder and wrote down 514-213-54. W*hat were those last two numbers? Was it 1, 2, or 2, 2 or 4, 2?*

"Coffee this morning, Sonny?" asked the waitress while flipping over a cup and pouring, not waiting for Kevin's reply.

"Yes, please," answered Kevin.

The waitress pushed a menu toward him. "The Denver Omelet is our special this morning," she said, working her way down the counter and refilling customers' coffee cups.

Kevin pushed the menu aside. The smell of bacon floating in the air reminded his stomach that he hadn't eaten since yesterday afternoon.

"What are you having?" asked the waitress, snatching back her pencil from Kevin's fingers.

"I'd like two eggs over easy, some sourdough toast, light with the butter, and some fruit. That bacon smells good. I take three pieces that are not too crisp and not greasy."

"I'll give you a couple of extra napkins, and you can squeeze the grease out of the bacon if you need to," the waitress replied as she returned the pencil to her ear.

"Plus, some fresh-squeezed orange juice," Kevin added.

"It's fresh out of a can," the waitress replied with the pencil back on her order pad.

"That'll be fine," said Kevin, folding the napkin on which he had written the partial number. "I'll be right back. I'm going to make a phone call from my car."

"That must be your fancy-pants sports car out in the lot. Got a phone in it and all," the waitress quipped. "Ten minutes until your meal is ready."

The signal from the bag phone was sporadic. Tina could understand enough of the message to know that Kevin would call her back when he got to Redding.

After breakfast, Kevin hurried across the parking lot, and a small chirp sounded from the car alarm as it deactivated. When he

turned the key, the blue digital display on the dashboard showed it was already 74 degrees. *I should put the top down, but I need to get going if I want to be with Tina tonight.*

In Redding, the signal indicator on the car phone still showed a weak signal. *These portable car phones are crap. They're just going to be a fad. There's probably a pay phone in that grocery store parking lot.* It took three attempts with an operator before a long-distance call got successfully established.

"Hello." Tina's soft voice was barely audible through the heavy metal handset.

"Tina, I drove into Redding and couldn't get a strong signal. I had to find a payphone and an operator."

"Kevin, hold on a minute. I got someone on the other line." **Click.**

The pay phone disconnected! Kevin started to redial when the car phone rang. He ran to the SL600, leaned in through the window, and hit the **CONNECT** button. He could barely hear Tina. "I'll call you back on a landline. Don't put me on hold,"

Back in the phone booth and with operator assistance. "Tina, don't put me on hold! I'm calling from a pay phone, and we will get disconnected."

"Okay," Tina replied. "Sue was on the other line. Tim just broke up with her."

"Lucky for Sue. She deserves better."

"What do you mean by deserves better? Tim's going to be somebody, maybe a doctor or a politician. That is, if the NBA doesn't draft him," Tina rambled.

"Slow down, Tina. The NBA isn't going to draft Tim, and he doesn't have the grades to be a doctor." Kevin paused, "He's good at acting; maybe he should be a politician."

"That's not nice!"

"Anyway, do you want me to see about getting you flown into Redding?"

"I have a hair appointment. The earliest I can leave will be about two this afternoon."

"I thought you got your hair done yesterday?" Kevin was confused.

"Ah… they changed my appointment at the last minute." Tina lied.

"Tina, can't you forget about your hair? I'll call Condi right now and have her get Dad's pilot to fly you into Redding?"

"I'd never go out in public with my hair trashed out. Plus, I should go over and see Sue. She's hurting."

"She's better off," Kevin paused for a loud Harley Davidson to roar by. "Is Sue planning on coming up to the lake? If the two of

you drove up together, you could talk." Kevin offered in a coaxing tone.

"Yeah, maybe I should drive up with her. She's really upset."

Kevin quietly breathed a sigh of relief. He wanted to be with Tina finally, but he also didn't want to drive back to the Redding airport in the heat of the day. "I'm sure Sue could use your support."

"But, what about just the two of us? If Sue comes up with me, we can't be alone?"

"Tina, that's okay. You know, we've waited this long to be together. One extra night won't matter." Kevin paused. "The houseboat I rented is over thirty feet, has three levels, and has a master suite."

"Kevin, that sounds awesome. I'll let Sue know that we will be hooking up and to give us some privacy."

"We'll talk about it when you get here." Kevin paused; he felt uncomfortable, like he had gone to Tina's parents' home.

"The master suite sounds perfect. You'll be able to tear off the sexy lingerie that I bought at the mall…"

"Tina, when we spend our first night together, I want it to be perfect. I want it to be a commitment we'll always keep," Kevin paused again. "I want to do the right thing. If you got pregnant, I would give you and the baby one hundred percent of myself."

"Kevin, it's not like we're getting engaged or going on a honeymoon. Or like…" Tina was now the one feeling uncomfortable and paused.

"Tina, are you there?"

"Yes, I'm here." Tina paused, then said, careful to choose her words. "Wow, I don't know what to say. That's heavy stuff." Tina paused again. "You do know that I take birth control?"

"No, I didn't know," Kevin replied quietly.

"Kevin, I've taken birth control since I was fourteen."

"Since you were fourteen, why?" Kevin awkwardly asked.

"Well, mainly to regulate my period." Tina was quick to answer.

"Oh." Kevin wished that he hadn't asked.

"Kevin, are you there?" Kevin spun in the phone booth and pushed the spring-loaded bi-fold doors open.

"Sorry, Tina. I didn't mean to lay all this heavy stuff on you."

"It's not that big of a deal," Tina replied softly. "Anyway, you're probably right about Sue. The plan is for everyone to meet in the resort parking lot on Monday at noon. I'll see you then."

"That will work," Kevin said in a relaxed voice. "I could use some downtime for myself. I'm not sure about working for my father. Yesterday, he mentioned something about firing Richard Johnson because he's having an affair."

"Who's Richard Johnson? Who is he cheating with? Is he cheating with your mom?" Tina asked in a flurry while devouring the gossip.

"He's the shop foreman. I don't know who he is cheating with. It's not my mom!" Kevin snapped into the phone. "Why accuse my mom of something like that?"

"Sorry, Kevin," Tina replied, then paused. "I didn't mean it like that. It's just my mom had an affair at her Real Estate company just to hurt my stepdad."

"Your mom cheated for that reason?"

"Yeah, it was a get-even fling," replied Tina.

"Anyway, Richard has worked for Trask Enterprises since I was born. He's Condi's father, and his son Jabbar got shot last year."

"Oh yeah, I remember you coming home for the funeral," Tina tenderly replied. "What's that have to do with you?"

"Well, I told my Father if he let Richard go, I wouldn't come to work at the company."

"What would you do? Where would you work? Would your father take the car back? Don't you have some rule or commitment set up by your grandfather?"

"Tina, I don't give a damn about the car! Yes, there is a trust agreement, now that I have graduated. But I'm not going to let Richard Johnson get screwed over!" Kevin looked out from the phone booth to ensure no one could hear his ranting.

"Kevin, don't get so worked up. You're a trust fund baby."

"Tina, you don't get it. It's like my whole life is laid out for me. There's nothing for me to strive for."

Blip Blip. "Kevin, I got another call coming in."

"Don't put me on hold," Kevin warned. "Unless you want us to get disconnected again."

There was a silence over the phone. "Sorry. What were you saying about giving back your sports car?"

Kevin paused. "Forget it; go ahead and take your call. I'll see you on Monday."

"Bye, I can't wait for Monday night for us to hook up on that awesome houseboat." Tina quickly clicked the line twice to take the waiting call.

"Hey, gorgeous, Tim Baylor here. I guess you heard about Sue and me. Sorry to call so early, but I need to talk to someone who understands. I know that you will."

The spring-loaded phone booth door slammed shut as Kevin exited. He focused on the sporting store across the street. *I'm going fishing; that should be relaxing.* Kevin retrieved his wallet from the center console and headed across the street. Three hundred dollars of fishing equipment and the salesman's fishing tips were a sure bet for catching fish. Kevin loaded the tackle box

and fishing vest into the trunk, but the two new fishing poles would not fit. He lowered the top and raised the automatic roll bar. The sporting goods store salesman headed across the street with a bungee cord and helped Kevin secure the new fishing poles to the retractable roll bar.

Three teenage girls were pointing at each other and telling each other that Kevin must be a movie star or something. He added to their excitement when he plopped into the driver's seat, slipped on some designer sunglasses, and turned up the 200-watt stereo system. One more detent of the ignition switch and the V-12 roared to life. A wink at the girls and a wave to the store owner while the two rear tires made a slight squeal as Kevin pulled away to go fishing.

The temperature had climbed twenty degrees at the Bridge Bay Resort parking lot. It took three trips back and forth to his car to unload the groceries, supplies, and fishing gear. As he was untying the houseboat, Benny, the frail dock boy, yelled, "Hold on. Wait a minute, Mr. Kevin. You had another call."

Kevin stopped untying the rope, turned, and asked, "Do you know who it was?"

"Yes, she said, Condi. She said, Mr. Robert Trask wants you to call."

Kevin went back to untie the houseboat. "If Condi calls back, tell her you didn't see me."

"I can't do that, Sir."

Kevin stood up, towering over Benny, reached into his pocket, and pulled out three crisp ten-dollar bills. "Here, take this."

Ben looked at the three bills. "I can't take money to lie. I'm not like Judas."

Kevin hesitated and said, "Ah… I'm not paying you to lie. It's a tip for getting both messages to me."

"No, that's okay. It's my job. I can't take the money."

"I'll tell you what; you call Condi back and tell her I got her message." Kevin held out the three bills. "It's a long-distance call, so put the money in the till. I can pay you to do that, can't I?"

"Thirty dollars is way too much."

Kevin put one of the bills back into his pocket. "I'm impressed with your historical knowledge of Judas."

"Thanks, and twenty bucks is too much."

"Young man, you drive a hard bargain," Kevin said as he forced a ten-dollar bill into Ben's hand.

Benny unwillingly took the bill and then asked. "Are you related to the Trask Trailer family?"

"Yes, I am!" Kevin replied with a noticeable scowl.

"That's what I thought. After I took the message, I looked at the houseboat rental agreement and checked your last name. Trask Trailers has been on the local news at the hospital a lot."

"Why so?" Kevin hated all the attention the Trask name brought to him.

"Something about outpouring, outsourcing, or something like that. The newsman kept asking the rich man if people would be out of work."

"That was probably my father," Kevin mumbled and bent to untie the boat.

Ben sensed the strain in Kevin's reply. "So that must be your Mercedes SL600 with a V12 and retractable roll bar up in the parking lot? It has a 48-valve engine with over 400 horsepower." He took a deep breath and asked. "Have you had it over a hundred miles an hour?"

"Maybe once or twice," Kevin replied.

"Cool! How much over a hundred?"

"Ten or twenty miles over."

"Wow! One hundred and twenty miles an hour!"

From his squatted position, Kevin turned and looked up at Benny. "I'll tell you what. Call Condi and tell her I'll call back this evening. I'll take you for a spin in the Mercedes SL600 if you can do that for me."

"Sure, I'll do that. But she didn't leave a number. She said for you to call."

Kevin stood, pulled out his wallet, and took out a black business card. Embossed in gold was the name **ROBERT C TRASK.** On the back were two phone numbers, one marked 'office' and the other 'home'.

Ben flipped over the card. "Which phone number do I call?"

"Call the office number. Condi will answer," Kevin instructed.

"I will do that," replied Benny as he stared at the business card.

Kevin's voice turned serious, "I know I can trust you not to give out those numbers. Please destroy the card after you talk to Condi."

"Okay!" Ben replied as he wrapped the ten-dollar bill around the business card and slipped them into his blue jeans' back pocket.

"Promise me that you never give out those private numbers,"

"Promise," Ben replied, and then confirmed the instructions. "You want me to tell the Condi woman you will call her tonight. And I should only call the private office number, not the home number."

"Yes, tell Condi I'll call this evening. She'll know what to say to Robert. She runs everything." Kevin unhooked the front mooring line from the dock cleat. "When I come in later, I'll give you that ride in my car."

"Cool," replied Benny with a huge smile, covered with excitement.

Kevin jumped on board and hurried to the tall captain's chair. The console and engine controls were similar to those on the Trask yacht. Kevin turned the key and looked down at the cluster of gauges as they came on.

When Benny bent over to untie the rear mooring line, his ball cap fell off. Kevin took note that he was practically bald. Ben stood up and tossed the mooring line onto the rear deck. "You're good to go," he yelled over the sound of the houseboat engines, putting his cap back over his fuzzy head.

Kevin maneuvered the houseboat out and away from the dock. "Thanks, Benny!" The sun was penetrating through Kevin's polo shirt. He drove about fifty yards, put the Stargazer into neutral, and swiveled the captain's chair to the side. When he yanked off his polo shirt, his Maybach sunglasses got hooked in the collar and got flung overboard. *Crap, there goes eight hundred dollars in the drink.*

Shouting came from the dock. "I saw that. I'll have my big brother dive for them!" The overhead bright sun made Benny's pale skin appear white and ghostlike.

I bet Benny Boy is fighting cancer—

Chap 3——————Child's Bucket-List

Easy like Sunday Morning was the song stuck in Kevin's head as he cruised peacefully up the Pit River arm on Lake Shasta. He secured the mooring line to an old snag sticking out of the water, went into the galley, and started putting the groceries into cupboards and the operating refrigerator. All the new fishing equipment and tackle got strewn on the table, including live worms, cheese bait, and the guaranteed-to-catch fish, 'Red Hot' eggs. Kevin elected to try the eggs first; not sure how to hook on a worm. He'd always had a guide do the grimy baiting and fish cleaning.

From the front of the lower deck, his first cast was across an old tree snag. When Kevin started to reel in the line, it got hung up; one hard tug, and everything was gone. The end of the line had curled where the hook had slipped off. Kevin hadn't eaten since breakfast in Redding. Ninety minutes later, he was already running low on tackle and patience. Kevin always caught Marlin, Tarpon, or Swordfish off the Caribbean Islands, but the deckhands would do all the rigging on those trips—all he had to do was reel in the catch.

Kevin's futile fishing endeavor bowed to a swim as the temperature approached triple digits. A dozen or more times, climbing up ladders to dive from the upper deck finally took its toll on him. Kevin stripped off his wet shorts inside the Captain's Room and lay down on one of the queen-sized beds. *This solitude is so peaceful, but I wish Tina were here. I wouldn't have her sleep in the other bed like when we went to Hawaii. This trip, we would be one, and…* Kevin dozed off.

The sound of metal bumping metal and footsteps jumping onto the houseboat woke Kevin. Naked, he ran from the bed to the window and saw that a smaller houseboat had pulled up beside the

Stargazer. He heard voices down the steps to the galley. "Kevin, are you up there?"

"Stan, is that you?" Kevin yelled as he picked up the damp shorts off the floor.

"Yeah, we came up early!" echoed back Stan's voice.

"I'll be right down," Kevin said, slipping on the **Duke Blue Devil** basketball shorts.

"Okay!" Stan yelled back as he started looking over all the new fishing equipment on the table.

"What's going on?" Kevin asked as he climbed down the inside ladder.

"Not much!" replied Stan. "The bald kid at the marina wasn't much help. He only told us that a member of the Duke Basketball team was on the lake. He would not give out your name or any other information. That young boy was very secretive."

"I asked him to keep quiet. Anyway, I came up yesterday. I had to get away. My Dad was on my butt over a tennis game."

"Tennis? I didn't know you played. I thought basketball was your sport." Stan said, picking up the fishing pole and checking the action by bending the tip.

"Hi, Kevin," came a soft voice through the screen door.

The bright sun behind Patty silhouetted her in the doorway. Kevin saw her tiny yellow bikini top after a few seconds of squinting. Two more voices came through the screen door from the smaller houseboat. Kevin moved to the door, cupped his hands around his mouth, and shouted, "Hey, Blake. Hey, Laura."

"So you're up here all alone?" Stan asked while examining the new fishing tackle on the table. "Tina's coming up tomorrow with the rest of the gang."

"How do you know that?" Kevin asked.

"Laura talked to Sue. Sue told Laura about Tim being upset because she got pregnant. Laura told Patty on the drive up here and so on. Now everybody knows. You get the picture," Stan answered.

"Yeah, whatever." Kevin snipped. "It's none of my business. I hope they don't go at each other this week. It might make things tense for everyone."

"It will be one hell of a party for five days. There'll be plenty of other Hotties for Tim to hit on if Sue gets on his case."

"Yeah, but that might damper things for the rest of us."

"Kevin, you worry too much. Tim will get this party going. He'll probably get some girls to go topless." Stan looked toward Patty, who was still standing just outside the screen door with her head tilted up, capturing the sun's rays. "Patty, could you grab me a beer?"

"Sure. Do you want one also, Kevin?" Patty asked in a let's party suggestive voice.

"No beer for me," Kevin replied and smiled at Patty.

"Hey, babe, get that tight ass of yours moving. I'm thirsty," yelled Stan, sliding into the galley booth.

"I might be one of those girls who go topless," Patty whispered to Kevin through the screen. She smiled at Kevin, turned, and leaped from one houseboat to another. Kevin stared; from her backside, she might as well have been naked.

"Patty looks good, doesn't she?" Stan said in a bragging tone.

"Yeah, she does! You have a nice-looking girlfriend; all the volleyball keeps her firm and fit." Kevin replied as he walked away from the door and sat down across from Stan.

"She's not my steady girl. We have the friends-with-benefits thing going on." Stan shut up when Patty pulled open the screen door with two beers in hand. She handed one to Stan and started to drink the other. Kevin had not seen a bathing suit so small since a family vacation years ago in Spain. He took another eyeful. In the hot stillness of the galley, there was some weird telepathic vibe floating among the three of them.

Stan twisted off the top of his beer and started chugging while watching Kevin tense up. Patty pushed her bare hip against Kevin's bare shoulder. He slid into the booth further so that she could sit. Stan smiled from across the table. Kevin got pinned into the corner while Patty rubbed her hand on his bare leg.

The awkward silence was interrupted. "Did you push the pedal to the metal in that radical new car?" Stan asked.

"No, it's too flashy. People are staring and asking questions about it everywhere I go, or wanting a joy ride."

"Isn't that the truth? I saw some guys in suits looking underneath it in the resort parking lot. I thought they were casing it out or something."

"When was this?" asked Kevin.

"When we were hauling stuff from the truck to the houseboat. I walked over to see what the two were up to. But they got into a black limo and sped off."

"Did you get the license number or anything?"

"No, never thought about it," Stan replied while gulping beer. "I'm sure your dad has it insured for theft."

"If that car got stolen, I wouldn't care." Kevin reached under the table and pushed Patty's hand off his upper thigh.

"Well, if those guys steal it, two Asian guys in suits. One young and one old shouldn't be hard for the police to locate."

"Two Asian guys! Are you sure?"

"Yep, Chinese, Japanese, or some type of Nese. One was fairly tall, and the other guy was stocky."

"How old do you think the tall one was?" Kevin asked.

"Not that old, maybe thirty or so."

"And the short one. How old would you think he was?"

"I don't know. It's hard to tell with those Asians," replied Stan, taking a long drink of beer.

The investigative conversation got halted by a scream from the other houseboat, followed by the words. "Damn you, Blake."

"I got to see this!" Stan jumped up from the table and ran out the screen door.

Blake was at the top railing with a water gun in one hand and a bathing suit top in the other. He had just sprayed Laura, who had been sunbathing on her stomach.

"Blake, I'm warning you, give me my top!" Stern words from Laura, careful not to rise.

Blake laughed, tossed the bathing suit top into the lake, and then turned the water gun on the other houseboat. Stan, Patty, and Kevin were now wet and standing on the deck below. The nozzle on the water gun started hissing as it ran dry. Stan disappeared to refill it. Laura now appeared at the railing with her arms crossed across her bare chest and saw her swimsuit top floating about ten feet from the front of the two houseboats.

Stan jumped across to the smaller houseboat to retrieve his water cannon, while Laura moved away from the side railing and reappeared with a towel wrapped around her chest. She came down the ladder and jumped off the front of the houseboat. Stan appeared and used the stream from the water cannon to sink the swimsuit top. Laura started treading water. She was not a very good swimmer.

"Laura, swim over here," Kevin yelled now at the front of the Stargazer just before he dove into the lake. Thirty seconds passed—Kevin did not surface! Another fifteen seconds passed…

Stan and Blake were on the other bow, scanning over the pea-green water, frozen in fright and too scared to react.

Kevin swam under the Stargazer to the stern and waited to hear a splash from anyone diving off the bow to try to find him. There was only dead silence!

In disgust, Kevin pulled himself on board and walked to the bow. "Laura, here's your swimsuit top."

Everyone turned around. Laura hurried toward Kevin. "Thank you. This swimsuit cost me over a hundred dollars."

"I was just about to dive in to rescue you," Stan shouted from the other houseboat.

Nobody said a word. Stan was known for misogyny and lying

"I'm supposed to contact my father. I'm going to try that mobile bag phone."

"Can a phone work way out here?" Blake moved toward the bow rope and pulled the boats closer.

"Possibly, it sort of worked from the marina parking lot."

Kevin went inside, grabbed the bag phone, and went out onto the upper Stargazer deck. Patty was directly across on the upper deck of the other houseboat.

Kevin punched in numbers on the handset and listened for a dial tone. Nothing; the display read **NO SIGNAL**.

"Hey, Kevin, you want me to cook you a burger?" asked Stan in front of a barbecue grill.

"No thanks. I got plenty of food over here," Kevin answered as he entered the Trask private phone number again. The display flashed **NO SIGNAL.** Kevin returned the handset to the black nylon bag and walked to the side railing. "Hey, everyone, I need to take off for a while. I have to make a couple of phone calls." Kevin hurried down the ladder and untied the bow line.

While untying the stern, Patty casually approached. "Kevin, would you like me to come along and keep you company?"

"What about Stan?" Kevin asked from his bent-over position.

"Stan is the one who suggested I ride along," Patty forced a smile.

"What?" Kevin glanced up.

"Yeah, Stan told me about you, and he's okay with it."

"Stan told you what about me?" Kevin wanted an answer.

"He said you were shy around women. Maybe I can help you overcome that shyness." Patty lightly licked her lips. "Maybe I can do something for you while you drive the boat. You know something that isn't sexual relations."

Kevin looked deeply at Patty; from their all-day flirting, he felt a connection. "Patty, I appreciate the offer, but I have some family business, maybe later."

"Won't your girlfriend be here later?"

"Tina won't be here until tomorrow."

"Like that's cool," replied Patty with a wink. "Remember the President said, 'It's not sexual relations, so no need for anyone to know."

"Yes, I remember the forty-second President saying that," Kevin replied with a devilish grin.

Kevin thought about Patty's offer while piloting the houseboat back toward the marina. But mostly, he thought about how his grandfather had changed his life the summer he was finding his sexuality at the age of fourteen. After that awkward summer, it was prep school, basketball camps, and a demanding battle to keep his college scholarship. Kevin's life to date had been all laid out without any time for true intimacy.

While cutting a swath through the dark green water of Lake Shasta, Kevin thought about starting a different life somewhere else, something not under the Trask family umbrella. Finishing up college on the East Coast had been a reprieve, but now he was back home and felt smothered. Kevin prayed, *Oh God, I genuinely thank you for all you have given me. But is the Trask family's fate and future my legacy, or is there something more?*

Benny spotted the Stargazer pulling up to the dock. He ran across the wooden planks and secured the bowline. Next, Benny tied off the stern and yelled, "Coming in to make that phone call, Mr. Trask?"

"Yes, and please don't call me Mr. Trask," Kevin replied, shutting off the motor.

"Yes, sir," replied Benny in an anxious voice, eager to be helpful.

"And don't call me sir," Kevin said as he stepped from the boat onto the dock.

Benny followed in Kevin's footsteps. "I did call Condi at Trask Enterprises. She asked me if you had tried that new car phone. I told her you were out on a houseboat, which was why I was calling. I just gave her your message and didn't say anything else. Some other people asked about you, also."

"Hey, slow down. You did just fine."

"Thank you, Mr. Trask. I want to help."

Kevin stopped in his tracks. "Benny, just call me Kevin. That's my name."

"Okay, I'll call you Kevin."

"Can I use that phone in the office again?" Kevin started walking with Benny on his heels.

"That should be okay. Will you be calling that number on the card you gave me? If so, you'll have to call collect."

"No problem. I'll call collect."

"I'd let you call long distance, but my dad says we must watch the bottom line. But since you tipped me this morning, you can call, and I can pay my dad back."

"That's okay! I'll call collect. But your dad's right about the bottom line. It sounds like he's a good businessman."

"Oh, he is. Dad says the customer is not always right, but I shouldn't argue. Dad says that the customer will tell everyone if you do them wrong and probably not tell anyone if you do them right."

"I like that! It sounds like something my Granddad would say to me when I worked in the welding shop." Kevin picked up the pace.

"My Dad tells me and my brother to always be honest. That truthfulness will set us free. Be honest at work and be honest with

yourself, and retirement will be long and great beyond our dreams." Benny replied in a proud voice.

"Well, I won't be thinking about my retirement for a long time. I'm just starting my career. That's the main reason I'm up here. I need some alone time out on the lake."

"The retirement my Dad is talking about is the one in heaven. No person knows the date it will start. Mine could start tomorrow."

Kevin didn't have a reply. He suspected something was wrong with Ben.

Benny hurried ahead and opened the sliding door to the marina office. "You can make your call from that phone."

Kevin went directly to the wall phone beside the green chalkboard behind the counter. As he placed a collect call, he looked over the messages on the chalkboard. The Hung Meng name was erased and overwritten. Kevin turned around and saw Benny on the dock, filling a row of red boat tanks with gas.

Maria accepted the collect call and was unusually short with Kevin before she went to get Robert Trask.

Kevin noticed a brown accordion folder on the lower shelf as he waited. The words **Rental Agreements** were on it. He moved down the counter, and his finger found the **M** tab. "Kevin, is that you?" blasted through the phone.

"Yes, it's me," Kevin replied, pausing his file search.

"We needed to talk before you tore out of the club yesterday. I know that I promised you three weeks off. But I might need you to start before then."

"What about our agreement? Am I still starting in the shop?"

"Kevin, things are getting way too complicated to play that starting at the bottom game. Mr. Hung Meng just had Pro-Star Investigators do a private plant audit. Something isn't right! You might have to take over Richard's department."

"What?" Kevin yelled into the phone. "You mentioned yesterday you might be letting Richard Johnson go." Kevin paused to take a deep breath. "I told you if Richard goes, so do I."

"I don't have a clue about what is going on with Richard. He has bigger problems than work." Robert Trask yelled back.

"I don't understand! Who ordered an audit of Richard's department?"

"I told you, Mr. Meng did. We'll talk about it when you get back."

"If Richard has a serious problem, I want to know about it now! Granted, he's not been the same since Jabbar got shot."

"Kevin, we'll talk when you get back from the lake. The audit is over and out of my hands."

"What about Condi? She will know what's going on with her dad. I'll call her."

"Don't do that!" warned Mr. Trask just before he blasted out the words. "Richard has been cheating on Ruth."

"I don't believe it." Kevin blasted back.

"Condi might have to testify against her father." Robert took a deep breath. "It's going to get ugly."

"How do you know Richard is having an affair?" Kevin asked in a firm voice.

"I have the pictures. I looked at them yesterday when we talked out by the pool." Robert drew another deep breath. "The woman he was with died yesterday in a horrific car accident. I'm still getting the details."

Ben walked back into the shop and noticed Kevin at the far end of the counter with the phone cord stretched out and his hand under the counter. "Are you looking for something?"

Kevin took his finger off the **M** index tab and moved his hand to the top of the counter. "Hold on for a second, Dad," Kevin covered the mouthpiece with his hand. "Benny, do you have a pencil and a piece of paper to write on?"

Benny came around the counter, retrieved a paper pad, and grabbed a pencil from a soup can next to the cash register. "Here you go."

Kevin took his hand off the mouthpiece. "Dad, who gave you the pictures of Richard?"

"Pro-Star Investigators, Mr. Meng insisted on using them. I got a call coming in." Dial tone followed a *Click*.

Kevin hung up the phone and wrote PRO-STAR INVESTIGATORS. "Thanks." Kevin tore off the top paper from the pad.

"No problem," replied Benny, then added. "I topped off the gas. You didn't cruise the Stargazer much."

"Just up the Pit River. Then I tied up, tried some fishing, and went swimming."

Kevin focused on the audit company name, putting the paper in his wallet. He pulled out a twenty, "This should cover the fuel and your time."

"That's too much money, Mr. Kevin. I put the gas on the rental agreement. Checking the houseboats and topping off gas is my job."

"Okay," replied Kevin, mostly thinking about **Pro-star Investigators**. "Then take this for the use of the phone."

"You already paid to use the phone. Remember how you promised me a ride in your race car."

"Just let me know when," Kevin said as he stepped out the door.

"How about right now?" Benny rushed toward the open door, raring to go.

Kevin turned, looked back, and replied. "Maybe tomorrow or before I leave on Friday."

Disappointment froze Ben in his tracks. "I was just kidding about tonight. I know you got important stuff to take care of."

"No, let's do it tonight. What time do you get off work?"

"My Dad will be back at four-thirty," Benny replied with a rejuvenated tone.

"Tell you what, I'll go to the restaurant and get something to eat. Find out from your dad if going for a short ride is okay."

"Wow, I'll see you up in the restaurant. I have a few more chores, and then I'll be done!"

Kevin had just started the second half of a BLT when Benny came rushing into the restaurant. From all the Hi's and 'How's it going?' you could tell Benny was well-liked. Even the cook gave Ben the thumbs-up through the serving cubbyhole.

Benny made a beeline toward Kevin. "My Dad said it's okay to take me for a ride. At first, he said I could not ride with a stranger. But I told him you were the Trask Trailer man."

Kevin took another bite of the BLT. The waitress came over to the table. "Here you go, Benny, we made too many milkshakes."

"Thanks, Edna," Benny replied with an ear-to-ear smile. "I'm going for a ride in a super-fast car like my PlayStation game has."

"Wow, that's cool. Maybe you should drive since nobody can beat you at Rumble Race on your PS2 console."

Kevin glanced up at the waitress and frowned. "I don't think he's old enough to drive."

"Kids play all those military shoot-em-up, blow-em-up video games. They make better soldiers after they join up." Edna replied in a defensive tone.

"They have age restrictions and warnings on those violent games," Kevin argued.

"That's not true; kids, not even in high school, play those computer games. So why not let special kids drive when they're…"

"That's his car out there." Benny pointed out the window.

"I thought so. Sure, has been a lot of people looking at it."

"Anybody suspicious?"

"Not really, just the normal gawkers." Edna's tone turned from harsh to pleasant.

"If you're giving out rides, how about giving this old broad a ride?"

"Ah... Maybe when Benny and I get back."

"Don't choke on your food, college boy," Edna smiled. "I'm just kidding."

Kevin took a last bite of the BLT, reached into his pocket, and left a twenty on the table. "Let's go," Kevin said. Benny grabbed the chocolate milkshake and followed out the door.

Kevin pushed the key fob, and the alarm chirped; the doors unlocked. "I'd better run my milkshake back," Benny said, standing next to the passenger door.

"That's okay, hop in," Kevin plopped down behind the steering wheel. He reached over and pushed a latch, and a retractable cup holder slowly ejected from the dash.

"Cool," Ben said as he inserted the paper cup.

Kevin turned the key, and the V12 roared to life. He pushed a button on the dashboard, and the top started to retract into the trunk. Benny watched in awe. After it fully retracted, a low humming noise sounded as the automatic roll bar rose. There was a solid clunk as the roll bar locked itself into place. "Buckle up," Kevin's instructed.

"I know a road with a hairpin corner like my PlayStation game. Can we go on that road?" Benny asked as he excitedly pulled the seatbelt across his chest.

"Sure, tell me the name of the road." Kevin moved his hand to the GPS.

"Trinity Loop road," Ben rattled off. "The road is just across I-5. My brother and I used to ride that road on our mountain bikes when it was gravel, but they paved it last year."

Kevin pushed hard on the gas pedal when he pulled onto I-5 south. The SL 600 accelerated to 80 MPH. Immediately, they came up on a semi-truck. Kevin put on the left blinker and shot around the truck.

"Wow," Benny yelled out from the passenger seat. "Can we do a hundred before the next exit?"

Kevin pushed harder on the gas pedal and then had to merge in behind another semi. The green road sign read **Trinity Campground Exit 1 mile,** and Kevin decelerated.

"Wow! That was so cool. I bet this car can do at least a hundred-fifty miles an hour!" Shouted Benny over the rushing wind

"Probably more than that," Kevin loudly replied while glancing down. "The car GPS quit working."

"The new campgrounds on Trinity Loop Road are not open yet. Maybe that's why the map quit? But, I know the way." Benny yelled as they sped around the off-ramp.

Benny gave Kevin directions, and Kevin probed Benny about the name that got erased from the chalkboard. Ben promised to ask his father if he could share the customer information.

The temporary orange construction sign read: **New asphalt-fresh shoulder gravel**. Kevin put on his left blinker, turned onto Trinity Loop, and stopped in the middle of the resurfaced road. He opened the door and got out to take in the view. They had climbed at least two thousand feet above the Pit River arm of Shasta Lake.

The new black asphalt was hot from the blaring sun; the road was straight and at least a six percent downgrade.

Ben got out of the car, looked down the road, and said. "At the bottom of this straightaway is a hairpin corner to the right, and then the backside has a bunch of uphill curves. That's where all the new campsites are."

"Well, let's take a practice run," Kevin said as he opened the door.

Benny excitedly plopped back into the passenger seat, pulling the seat belt snugly across his frail body. "That hairpin corner down there is like the one on my PlayStation."

Kevin revved the engine, pulled the shifter back, and pushed on the gas pedal. The tires squealed, and the SL600 shot forward. The downgrade helped with acceleration; they were doing almost eighty miles per hour before Kevin started to brake. It was a rush that Kevin hadn't expected. He methodically steered around the hairpin curve. Then, the unobstructed view of Shasta hit him in the face.

"Mount Shasta is impressive from this side," Ben yelled.

It took Kevin a few moments to reply. "It sure is!"

"Many men see a big mountain and then want to conquer it," Ben spoke with words beyond his age. "Life is not about the 'do or die' mountaineer mantra. Life is about what you do before you die." Kevin wasn't listening to Ben. He got fixated on Mount Shasta. Now he had something to cross off a bucket list.

"You need to downshift going into corners to save your brakes. This model Mercedes has paddle shifting. That's what the five-speed automatic is made for, downshifting through corners."

"What?" Kevin was surprised by Ben's car knowledge.

"Speed up for the next corner, then right paddle shift just before you need to turn the steering wheel," Benny said with authority.

Kevin pushed on the gas; the turbo kicked in, and the SL600 leaped into action. He braked for the next corner, and the SL600 rounded through the curve slowly. "Like that?" Kevin asked.

"Sort of, but at this next corner, do the same thing except don't use the brakes."

Kevin followed Benny's instructions not to use the brakes. Just before the next corner, Ben bumped the paddle shifter! The concept SL600 slowed, squatted, and hugged around the curve. Kevin valued the driving lesson. They did Trinity Loop two more times—each lap got faster.

"This is our last lap," Kevin said when he stopped next to the orange canvas construction sign at the top of the downgrade.

"Okay, best I get back and help my Dad close up."

Kevin gripped the steering wheel and punched the gas pedal. They hit 85mph halfway down the straightaway. *Just a few more seconds,* Kevin's pride spoke.

"Yahoo!" Benny yelled when the speedometer showed 100 mph!

Kevin's stomach knotted when the brake pedal felt like mush and went almost to the floor. The front tires locked up, and the back end started fishtailing! "We'll never make the corner," Kevin yelled, then everything turned to slow motion!

Benny bumped the paddle shifter, the transmission downshifted, and the V12 over-revved. He did it again, and the rear tires squealed. The engine howled! "Steer left!" Benny yelled over the sound of the two tons of metal skidding sideways.

Kevin yanked the steering wheel counterclockwise, and the car darted to the right and hunkered around the hairpin corner in a sideways skid. With his pencil-thin arm, Ben pulled on the emergency brake! Gray smoke poured from the rear wheels. Finally, the SL600 stopped inches from the fresh gravel shoulder. The slow motion continued as Kevin shut off the engine and opened the door to escape the thick smoke of burning rubber. Staring down into a fifty-foot ravine, Kevin bent over, put his hands on his knees, and dry heaved.

Ben emerged from the heavy, gray, rubber-smelling smoke and approached Kevin. "Are you okay?"

Shaking uncontrollably, Kevin pointed at the car, sitting sideways on the left side of the road. "That's dangerous if someone comes around the corner!"

Ben jumped into the driver's seat, moved the seat forward, started the roadster, and carefully moved the car to the right side of the road. He sensed something was amiss with the brakes. He'd been driving work tractors and parking boat trailers since he was ten.

Not looking side to side, Kevin ran across Trinity Loop Road. "Can you drive us to the top of the loop? We'll get T-boned sitting here!"

Ben meandered through the corners and curves on the backside of Trinity Loop Road. He used the paddle shifter to downshift and carefully navigate into one of the campgrounds. "That was so awesome on the hairpin," Benny said, putting the car into park.

Kevin's heart started racing again when they entered the Bridge Bay Resort parking lot. Hank was coming up the wood dock ramp. A father finding out about all the reckless driving wouldn't be pleasant. It warranted a slap across the face.

Hank approached the driver's door. "Are you okay? You look ill."

"He's okay, Dad. But I think there is something wrong with the brakes."

"Like what?" asked Hank, looking over the top of Kevin at Benny.

"I don't know, they feel mushy. Like no rear brakes or something." Benny answered, exiting the passenger door, running to the driver's side, and opening the door. He pulled the hood release, and the release spring twanged.

"Look at this twin-turbo V12 engine," Hank said to Benny.

"You can't believe the torque this motor puts out." Benny gleefully replied.

Hank removed the top of the master cylinder. "There's the problem. Low brake fluid in one of the reservoirs."

"Good thing both sides weren't low?" Ben added.

"This is a hand-built concept car. Probably an oversight at the factory."

Kevin finally emerged to see what was going on under the hood. "What is a master cylinder?"

"Right there," Hank pointed. "It transfers pedal pressure to the brakes using hydraulics."

"Oh, it's a safety thing to have a backup reservoir?"

"No, not really," Hank had better things to do than explain hydraulic brakes. "Benny, there is brake fluid in the shop on the shelf with the other chemicals. I think it is a blue and yellow container."

Ben took off toward the gangplank. Hank looked over at Kevin. "You didn't have to let him drive. Just a ride in this sports car would have been enough."

"Ah, well." Kevin stuttered. "It just worked out that way."

"Thanks. he loves his race car video games. You more than fulfilled one of his wishes." Hank took a deep breath, then muttered, "Only if his older brother…"

Two gray and one white Pigeon flew out when Benny parted the shop doors. After a couple of minutes, Ben emerged with a blue and yellow bottle.

Hank topped off the master cylinder with brake fluid. "I need to get back to work." He took a red shop rag from the rear pocket of his coveralls, wiped his hands, and extended one hand to Kevin. "Thank you, Mr. Trask."

"It was my pleasure," replied Kevin with a firm handshake from the heart.

"Here, put this back." Hank handed Benny the bottle of brake fluid. "I have some extra paperwork to take care of tonight. Let your mom know."

"Sure, I'll ride my bike home. I can't wait to tell Mom about driving a Mercedes SL600 with a turbocharged V12." Benny ecstatically replied.

"Why don't you leave out the part about driving? Your Mother will be all over me if she knows." Hank winked at Kevin

Kevin moved the car to the far corner of the lot, put the top up, and set the alarm. Benny rode over on his mountain bike. "Thank you, Mr. Kevin, for letting me drive your car. I didn't even have that on my list."

Kevin stood silent for a moment, not one to lament with God's will. When Benny was out of sight, Kevin looked upward*. No child should have a bucket list.*

Chap 4—————The Sexual Revolution

It was dusk when Kevin found Blake, Laura, Stan, and Patty. He pulled the Stargazer alongside the smaller houseboat. Blake helped Kevin tie the two houseboats together, and they dropped anchor. Things were quieter now; Stan passed out two hours ago. Laura and Patty were cleaning up in the galley.

Venus and Mars were starting to emerge when Blake and Kevin lay back in the lounge chairs on the top deck of the Stargazer. Soon after that, Laura and Patty joined them. The foursome settled in to enjoy the solitude of the late-night heat and the stillness of the lake. Patty pulled her lounge chair close to Kevin in hopes that Kevin might take her up on her earlier offer. The conversation went from the Duke Blue Devils winning the basketball championship to three white Duke Lacrosse team players brutally attacking and raping a black exotic dancer. Despite the second exotic dancer giving testimony that didn't support the rape and beating, they were found guilty by public opinion and many news outlets.

Sometime after midnight, Blake double-checked the anchors on both houseboats, then returned and took Laura by the hand. They carefully climbed down two levels and jumped from deck to deck to the smaller watercraft.

Patty stayed on board the Stargazer and kept inching herself closer to Kevin. But Kevin's mind was in a different place. *I'm not a kid any longer. I'll stand my ground; if Dad fires Richard, I'll not work at the family business. I'll have lunch with Condi when I get back; she knows everything that goes on at the corporate level. This merger between Mr. Meng and Myung Chan doesn't feel right. Grandpa Trask would never outsource any of our work…*

Patty put her hand on Kevin's thigh and asked. "How about a beer or a hard drink?"

"Not for me," answered Kevin.

"Well, I'm going to have another glass of wine." Patty got up, went to the wet bar, and poured a glass of wine. Then she rested

her firm, muscular butt on the deck railing, arched her back, and looked up into the star-filled night. "It sure is beautiful way up there," Patty said.

"And so are you," Kevin replied.

Patty felt a warm rush from the wine, but mainly from Kevin's compliment. "That's not true, but thank you for saying so." She smiled at Kevin.

"You are beautiful and have a muscular, firm body."

"Even with my flat chest and all?" Patty asked as she sashayed off the deck railing toward Kevin.

Kevin moved over when Patty squeezed onto his lounge chair.

"I'm not as sexy as those female beach volleyball players," Patty whispered into Kevin's ear. "But I'm nastier."

"If you say so." Kevin wiggled away from Patty and stood up.

"It cooled off. How about I go below and get a couple of sleeping bags?"

"That sounds good. You only need to get one sleeping bag," Patty softly replied.

Kevin climbed down the two ladders. On the lower deck, the sound of the water lapping against the aluminum pontoons was relaxing, blending in with the deep snoring from across the way.

Kevin's brain was back on notice when the screen door slapped. *Crap, I don't want to wake Stan. He was so drunk and obnoxious earlier today. I'm glad that he finally passed out. Someone could have drowned this afternoon. Also, thank God Benny knows so much about race cars and pulled the parking brake. Whatever is wrong with him, please heal him. In Jesus' name, I pray.*

It took Kevin a few additional minutes to locate his travel kit, brush his teeth, and apply some cologne. With a sleeping bag in hand, his head just came through the upper deck opening when he saw Patty curled up on the lounge chair. He tiptoed over to her, unrolled the sleeping bag, and gently placed it over her bare skin. Kevin then removed a wine glass from her fingers. She slid her empty hand between her head and the cushion and mumbled, "I prayed for Benny, too."

A gentle wisp of cool air blew across the lake. Kevin quietly returned to the galley for another sleeping bag. On a different lounge chair next to Patty, he slipped into the sleeping bag, folded his hands behind his head, and gazed up into the dome of stars. A surreal image of Benny riding his mountain bike a few hours earlier folded into a dream. It was one of those uncomfortable dreams that wouldn't offer closure and was hard to wake up from.

Stan's yapping broke the Monday morning calm as he wandered outside in an orange Speedo with the word **STUD** printed across the back. He chugged a beer and then cannon-balled off the

bow. He swam to the ladder and climbed back on deck. Dripping wet with a beer in hand, Stan proclaimed, "Let's party!"

Patty's head lifted from the lounge chair. It took a moment for her to get her bearings. She wrapped the sleeping bag around her bare shoulders and walked to the railing. "Stan, why don't you wait for the others to show up before you start to party?"

"Lighten up, Patty! Don't be such a bitch!" Stan snapped back and then chugged half a beer.

"I'm just saying that you passed out before six o'clock last night. Maybe it was because you started to party too early yesterday."

"I can handle my liquor!" Stan ran down the lower deck and dove over the railing for the second time.

Blake came out of the bedroom on the smaller boat. "What's going on?"

Now Laura appeared in the doorway, wearing just a blue T-shirt. She slid her arms around Blake; the shirt hiked up and exposed her bare butt. "Kevin, do you want to join us for breakfast this morning?" she asked while downward tugging on the blue shirt.

"Sure," Kevin replied, moving his eyes toward the rising sun.

Stan had a hell of a hangover and made sure everyone shared his pain. He was markedly rude at breakfast, twice referring to Patty as a skank. Deep down, Stan hated open relationships. He'd slept with plenty of women—but had yet to have a faithful girlfriend.

After breakfast, the tension eased when the houseboats were untied and started the long cruise to the resort. Kevin piloted the Stargazer and, through the open curtains, noticed that Patty and Stan were making up. *Tina and I will be more discreet than the two of them. We won't show off our lovemaking in front of everybody. We'll get away by ourselves.*

At least three dozen people were loading onto Bridge Bay Resort's houseboats, ski boats, and other watercraft. It was pandemonium as everyone rushed to put on gear and grab ice coolers. A fight was brewing over a jackknifed trailer and a dented fender at the boat ramp.

As Kevin pulled into a berth and before he even tied off the Stargazer, a couple of Duke Lacrosse players jumped on board. "Hey guys, I only rented this houseboat for myself and my girlfriend!"

"Yeah, right! Like you think that is going to happen."

The other Lacrosse player threw a sleeping bag through the opening to the second deck and started climbing the ladder with an ice cooler.

"Kevin, is it okay if I come aboard?"

Kevin looked up and finished tying off the stern mooring line. "Yeah, sure, Mary." He hurried forward to tie off the bow line and yelled over his shoulder, "Have you seen Tina yet?"

"No, not yet," replied Mary as she stepped on board the Stargazer.

Kevin finished tying off the bow. "I'll wait for Tina and Sue up in the parking lot. You can take one of the bunks next to the captain's room. Don't let anyone up on the top deck."

"Thanks. Is it okay if Sally shares a bed with me?"

"Yeah, no problem. I'd stake your claim now. I have a feeling it's going to get crowded. Just don't let anybody take the top deck or the captain's room," shouted Kevin as he hurried down the dock toward the ramp.

Kevin didn't see any Blue Devil basketball players from the top of the walkway. Someone on a motorcycle circled twice before parking next to Kevin's Mercedes.

Kevin jogged toward the far corner of the parking lot. Rick flipped down the kickstand with the heel of his leather boot, unfastened a helmet strap, and removed the brain bucket. "Hey, what's happening?"

"Not much. I don't see any other players from the basketball team," Kevin replied while looking over the parking lot.

"I don't know anything about that. All I heard was houseboats, booze, and women." Rick shouted. His ears were still ringing from the overly loud exhaust on his Harley.

"Have you seen Tina and Sue yet?" Kevin asked Rick, holding his hand up to shield his eyes from the sun reflecting off all the chrome on the customized motorcycle.

"Tina and Sue? Nope, haven't seen them," replied Rick, unlashing the leather bag from the handlebars. "But I did pass Tina and Tim on my way up here."

"Tina and Tim! Was Sue with them?"

"I don't think so. Unless Sue was in the back of the truck or Tim's boat."

"Back of the truck or in a boat? Rick, don't jerk me around!"

Rick stopped unlashing the bag from the handlebars. He looked Kevin straight in the eyes. "Hey, you know me. I'm not jerking you around. If there's a problem between you and Tina, ask someone else to spy for you. I know what I saw. Tina is with Tim!"

"Yeah, okay, Rick," Kevin replied, frustrated and confused.

"What houseboat you got? Is it okay if I crash on it?"

"It's the big one. It has Stargazer on it. Sally and Mary are on it now. You're more than welcome. Just don't take the top deck or the captain's room."

"Hey, thanks, man." Rick grabbed the sleeping bag and items from the saddlebags and headed toward the dock.

Kevin pushed the key fob, and the car locks popped up; he opened the passenger door and flopped into the passenger seat. With the key turned one notch, the stereo system came on. Kevin pushed down, then up, on a lever on the side of the passenger seat. The six-way lumbar seat moved back and then reclined far enough that he could observe without being seen. *Boy, this is going to be a zoo. I bet thirty people have already shown up. I wonder what happened with Sue. Tim drives a red car, not a truck; Rick's mistaken. Sue would be lucky to be rid of the guy. I know he's doing other girls besides her.*

Kevin's train of thought was broken by a bright yellow truck pulling a matching yellow ski boat toward the ramp. The aluminum-spoke wheels on the boat trailer matched those on the low-rider. The pickup headed toward the crowd and came to a sudden stop. The passenger door flung open, and Tina jumped out. Kevin reached for the seat lever and reclined a little more so as not to be seen.

Where's Sue? Rick is right. She didn't come with Tim. Kevin watched as Tina approached different people in the crowd. One of the guys pointed! Kevin turned the stereo off, dropped his head back onto the leather headrest, and closed his eyes. *I'll act like I'm sleeping.*

Tina trotted toward the Mercedes. The skimpy tube top barely held in her bouncing, tanned breasts. She spotted Kevin, opened the door, and crawled on top of him. "Kevin, I missed you so much. I wished I could have been up here last night with you."

Kevin pushed her off and stepped out. "How was the drive up here?"

"It was good. I had the opportunity to help patch things up between Tim and Sue. I learned a lot. And, like, I'm glad our relationship is solid. And like..." Tina rambled out her rehearsed answer.

Kevin started walking directly toward the yellow pickup and matching ski boat. "I don't see Sue. I thought you and she were coming up together?"

Tina grabbed Kevin's arm to slow him down and whispered, "That was the plan, but things didn't work out. I'll tell you about it later."

"Tell me what?" Kevin asked loudly, causing some of the crowd to hush.

"I'll explain things later," Tina whispered for the second time.

"Explain what? And where's Sue? I thought you were riding with her!"

"Kevin, not so loud. Like, people can hear." Tina's face was turning red.

Tim walked from around the back of the yellow ski boat with a beer in his hand. "Sue couldn't make it. She was feeling ill. So Tina volunteered to be my copilot because I fall asleep when I drive."

"Where's the rest of our team?" Kevin demanded an answer.

Tim stepped in front of Kevin, ready and willing to face any challenge. "Some of our black players confronted me about the O.J. trial. They wanted to know if I thought Mr. Simpson was guilty."

"So, that's why they aren't here?" Kevin and Tim were toe-to-toe.

"Your Dad is right, Kevin. You are an immature, weak-boned idealist who doesn't know crap about dealing with life in the real world!"

"I know what is right and just in the world."

"Sure, Kevin… And if the jury had found O.J. guilty, rioting would have been okay and justified?"

"That would have never happened," Kevin replied, unprepared with his rebuttal.

"Tell that to the fifty-three people who died after the Rodney King verdict. My uncle was one of those just driving through South-Central LA who lost his life." Tim argued.

Kevin stepped back. "Sorry, Tim, I didn't know about your uncle."

"No problem! How about we have a beer together?" Tim patted Kevin's shoulder.

"Yeah, later. I need to get my car looked at."

"Kevin, you would not have wanted Tina to make that drive alone? It just worked out this way."

"Help me get my stuff," Tina said while pulling on Kevin's hand.

Kevin followed Tina to the back of the yellow pickup. She pointed at two large suitcases and an overnight bag. When they were far from the crowd, Tina leaned in toward Kevin. "Sue didn't come because she's pregnant."

"What?" Kevin stopped in his tracks

Tina put her index finger in front of her lips, "Shish… Not so loud."

"Does Tim know?"

"Yeah, he wants her to get an abortion or to put the baby up for adoption. That's what they are fighting about."

"Wonderful… So Tim leaves Sue home alone to deal with that."

"Well, I do see Tim's point. He's going to try out for the NBA or apply to med school next year."

Kevin set the heavy, overstuffed suitcases on the asphalt. "I've told you before that Tim is not good enough to play in the NBA. The medical school thing is all made up. He embellishes constantly."

Tina turned her head. She looked back toward Tim in the parking lot, laughing and joking with some Lacrosse players. *Maybe that story about Tim's uncle getting killed in the Rodney King riots was a lie.*

Kevin picked up the suitcase and double-paced toward the dock. *Grandpa Trask was right, but he sure messed me up. I was only fourteen. I didn't even know what the sexual revolution was—*

Tina's childhood was also troubled, even at a young age. Her mother was fully aware that the sexual revolution came with real-life consequences. Nancy had Tina out of wedlock and made herself a promise that her daughter would never experience raising a baby on her own.

The 1960s marked a shift: married men were no longer exempt from the draft. But birth control was the most consequential development that assisted in breaking up families.

Kevin finally broke his awkward silence. "Come on, let's get your things loaded up. I want to undock before any more people board the Stargazer."

Tina couldn't understand what Sue was going through. At least there were more options than when her mother got knocked up. "Kevin, you know that I take the pill."

Kevin stopped in his tracks. "That's good to know. Now, let's get out of here!"

Chap 5——————Party-Party-Party

The head start to hide out on one of the rivers feeding Shasta Lake was short-lived. Within forty minutes, four houseboats, a party barge, and other watercraft caught up to the Stargazer. Tim was waterskiing, and Rick steered the yellow ski boat close enough for Tim to show off. Tina was on the bow with a thermos bottle filled with Tim's special margarita mix. Rick turned the ski boat and sped alongside the Stargazer. Tim cut to the outside of the wake and then back across; the spray made a twenty-foot arch across the stern. At the last moment, he straightened up, and the water ended just before the bow. "You're such a good water-skier," Tina yelled and waved.

By the maximum heat of the day, the five houseboats were anchored and lashed together far up the McCloud River arm of Shasta Lake. The yellow ski boat and some small personal watercrafts drifted around the flotilla. The supposed small outing had grown to a sixty-plus-person bash. Monday night was nonstop, and the liquor flowed, with the party going two hours past midnight. Kevin finally had had enough and went to the captain's room. Tina had washed up and then passed out on the bed. Kevin removed her thin, strapped leather sandals, put a pillow under her head, and pulled a sheet over her. She was beautiful without the fake tan, make-up, styled hair, and other add-ons. All the extra stuff was just baggage, robbing her of time that she could have spent on her inner appearance.

Kevin slipped under the sheet, lying on his back with his head propped up by two pillows.

Nobody is being themselves. Looks like Sodom and Gomorrah. I don't want it to be like this when we finally…

"Kevin, I hope you don't mind that Mary and I took this bed. The beds in the other rooms are spoken for," Sally's voice came across the darkened room.

"Not a problem," replied Kevin

"Boy-o-boy, what a party," Sally said as she tiptoed across the room.

"No kidding. It's bigger than anything I wanted."

"Looks like Tina's passed out," said Sally as she walked past.

"Yeah, she was out an hour ago."

"Even when Tina's blasted, she looks good," Sally said, pulling back the sheet on the adjacent queen bed.

"Yeah, she did drink a lot," replied Kevin

"Kevin, I don't mean she got way too drunk." Sally paused to rethink her words.

"Sally, don't worry about it." Kevin adjusted the pillows under his head. "Tina got blasted and started to be a bitch toward everyone. She started drinking margaritas as soon as we left the dock."

"I did notice that. Tina seemed upset about something," replied Sally. "I overheard some conversation about abortions and walked off."

"That's a good subject to stay away from," Kevin quietly replied.

"Sort of like politics or religion. I avoid those subjects too," replied Sally

"Are you crashing already?" Mary asked halfway through the floor, opening up to the Captain's Room.

"Not so loud," replied Sally, pointing toward Tina.

"Sorry," said Mary. When she passed through the center of the room, she whispered, "I think they are smoking weed on the yellow ski boat."

"I could smell it," Sally replied, removing her bra without taking off her volleyball shirt. "I'm not smoking any pot out here. I don't know if I could swim if I got stoned."

"Probably depends on how much you smoke," Mary replied. "I think a few of those guys are so drunk that if they fall overboard, they could drown?"

"That's scary," replied Sally.

"I don't care about the pot and alcohol. But I saw a few people sniffing up a line of Cocaine. That pisses me off. They'd better keep it off this houseboat; my name is on the rental agreement," Kevin spoke quietly yet firmly.

"The cocaine bothers me too," offered Sally as she slid under the sheet.

Mary lay on the edge of the bed. "If I see anyone shooting up anything, I'm leaving. It would kill my parents after working two jobs to put me through college, and then I get busted the first month after graduation."

A screen door banging shut in the galley below echoed from the ladder opening. Tim's head popped into the room a few seconds

later as he stood on the ladder's second rung. "What are you lightweights doing? The party's just starting!"

"Not for me, I've had it." Kevin propped up on one elbow.

"What about Tina? She said that she'd have a drink with me."

"Tim, she passed out over an hour ago. Let me worry about Tina!"

There was a short pause; Tim focused on who was in the other bed. "What about you two? How about having a drink with the number one water skiing champ?" Tim hiccupped, then wiped drool from his chin.

"I'll take a rain check," Sally said, lifting her head off the pillow.

"I'll pass too," said Mary through the dimly lit room.

"Whatever..." Tim hiccupped again. "I'll be back. You two make room for me. We don't want everyone to find out you two are Lesbos'. I'll sleep between the two of you."

"Tim, cool it!" warned Kevin. "Take a hike. Sleep on your speed boat, and don't come back up here!"

"Oh, come on." Tim climbed up the ladder into the room, swaying back and forth. "Tina told me all about you." He hiccupped again. "Tina said you were a prude, maybe even a virgin."

"Tim, you're drunk. Just climb back down and leave us alone!"

"I might be drunk, prude-boy. But…"

"But what?" Kevin swung his legs over the side of the bed.

"But I'd be taking better care of Tina! If you don't start doing her, someone else will. She needs it."

Kevin jumped from the bed. "You're an asshole."

Tim held his hand up as though to mock a fight. "Prude-boy, you're so tough…" Tim climbed back down laughing. He staggered from the Stargazer onto the next houseboat.

Kevin climbed down, shut, and locked the galley door. Back upstairs, he felt relieved that no lights were on to show his red face.

"Tim's a jerk," offered Mary, sitting on the edge of the bed with only panties on; she rubbed moisturizer up and down her legs.

"Yeah, what an asshole! Maybe he'll fall overboard, and then we'll know if you can swim when you're high." Sally said, lowering her head on the pillow.

Kevin walked across the room and crawled back onto the bed.

Mary pulled up her long legs, slid them under the bed sheet, and then slid next to Sally. "I can't stand the guy. I'll kick him in the balls if he tries to get in bed with us."

"That goes for me, too. We'll both take a whack at that prick."

"He won't be coming back up here. I locked the galley door." Kevin offered across the darkness.

Tuesday morning began with many people having bloodshot eyes and hangovers. Water and aspirin were the drink and drug of

choice for breakfast. By noon, the wind blew down the McCloud River Canyon, making the lake too choppy for water skiing. The plan for Tuesday evening slowly unfolded. Tie the five houseboats together in a U shape and close the other end off with ski boats, then let the no-holds-barred fun begin.

It was a laid-back afternoon, with most everyone soaking up the sun and going easy with the booze. Tina nursed a hangover and avoided any conversation about Sue, birth control, or unwed mothers. With Tim hovering, she played those cards, hoping to make Kevin jealous enough that his only desire would be to bed her that night.

By evening, the wind had eased, and the temperature rose. A few diehard water skiers stayed out on the mirror-like water as darkness set in. Rumors of a skinny-dipping party spread, and the watercraft got moved far up the McCloud River Canyon away from an access road, campgrounds, or cabins.

Tim used a blue-and-white ski rope to tie the yellow speedboat to a tree on the riverbank. It would be his pull rope if his after-midnight plan worked out. He backed into the open end of the flotilla and secured the stern between two other powerboats. Throughout the day, Tim chatted on and off with Tina, telling her he appreciated her attentive listening. He also confessed that Sue might not be the right woman for him.

It was Kevin's third day on the lake under the blistering sun. He was physically zapped, sunburned, and tired of the nonstop nonsense. He was rubbing lotion on when Tina came up the ladder. "What's the matter, Kevin? We haven't talked much all day."

"I'm tired of all this partying, and the sun has overbaked every inch of me." Kevin squeezed more lotion into his hand.

Tina took the lotion bottle from Kevin. "I hope not every inch of you got overbaked."

"Tina, with the drugs and all the underage drinking, I think we should leave!"

"Smoking a little weed is no big deal. Those two girls from Redding are over sixteen years old. Like, it's not anybody's business." Tina squeezed lotion into her hand.

"What do you mean? Nobody's business! I rented this houseboat. My name is on the agreement. The lake sheriff's patrol passed by twice today. I know they have binoculars and have been watching us."

"Kevin, you worry too much!" Tina slipped her hand down the front of Kevin's shorts. "Let me help you relax. Tim told me how uptight you must be."

Kevin pulled Tina's hand up. "Tim can take a flying leap. He's a jerk!"

"No, he isn't. He's just hurt and misses Sue." Tina replied defensively.

"Yeah, right. I noticed you two talking a lot."

"We've been discussing Sue. Tim is considering postponing medical school to secure a regular job. He is dealing with a lot of stuff."

"I don't care about Tim, his medical school fabrication, or his problems. Last week, I told you that I needed some space to think about not working at the family business. Now you seem more concerned about Tim."

"That's not true." Tina placed her hand on the waistband. "Like I just want us to be together, nobody else." She unbuttons Kevin's shorts.

Kevin stepped back. "Tina, we're tied up like we just circled the wagons. We can forget about being together. This whole party thing is too much! Let's get out of here."

"What about our friends?" Tina softly spoke, finding Kevin's manhood.

"Ah… I don't know more than ten people here," Kevin stuttered. "Let's untie the Stargazer and find a place all to ourselves."

"What about the party tonight?" Tina stopped moving her hand.

"We could unhitch before it gets too dark and can't do it."

The brief bliss was cut short by the sound of ripping fiberglass and wood from the ceiling, followed by yelping and a splash! Kevin jumped up the ladder to the private deck. A section of the chrome safety railing got bent inward toward the center of the deck. Kevin rushed to the side and saw someone swim under one of the houseboats.

"What happened?" asked Tina, now standing behind Kevin.

"Some jerk stood on the railing and bent it back when he dove in."

"Wow, that looks dangerous," Tina replied while pointing at the screws sticking out of the splintered wood.

Kevin grabbed the chrome railing and tried to push it back into place. The fiberglass fractured more, and the hole enlarged. They could now see right through the deck into the captain's room. "This is great! I promised the rental guy that when he let me have this houseboat, I would take good care of it."

"Have Trask insurance fix it," Tina said, looking through the hole at their bed below. "On the bright side, we can see the stars tonight."

"Insurance! No way. I will find the jerk who dove off and get him to pay for it."

"Kevin, it's not that big of a deal. Just turn it into insurance! My stepfather just got my car painted by insurance."

"What?" Kevin now looked directly at Tina and asked. "That's how you got the new paint job on your car?"

"I didn't; my stepfather did. I think he said that he accidentally spilled acetone on my car when he was in the garage. I don't know, but I got a new paint job for free."

Kevin turned away from Tina. Across the artificial lagoon, a musician connected a massive amplifier to his guitar and played the AC DC 'Back in Black' riff. "The party atmosphere is heating up." Kevin wasn't happy.

"It will be fun." Tina waved at the band. She liked bad boys. "You want me to get you something to drink?"

"Sure, why not!" A few people were swimming between the five houseboats. The Redding girls were already topless and high.

Tina went down to the galley and got a beer for Kevin. She made herself a virgin margarita and returned to the upper deck. "Here's your beer," Tina yelled over the blaring music.

"Thanks," The houseboat directly across from the Stargazer had half a dozen people dancing and gyrating in front of the blaring speakers.

Tina started twisting and be-bopping to the music. "Let's go on over and dance."

"Maybe after a while, I want it to be dark before I make myself look like a fool."

"I'll teach you how to dance like a pro. Just do what I do." Tina put her hands up on Kevin's shoulders, moved closer, and rubbed her boobs against his chest. Then she lowered her hands to his waist, pulled him in, and started to grind against him.

"What do you call this? Dirty dancing," he asked with a suggestive smile.

"It's whatever you want to call it." Tina smiled back.

"Well, we'd better head over to the music, or I won't be able to control myself." Kevin winked at Tina.

"Is that a promise?" Tina asked while moving her hands up to Kevin's head and pulling his lips towards hers. She French-kissed Kevin while continuing to grind into him. "Why don't we go lie on the bed?"

"Ah... Yeah, why don't we?" Kevin replied as his mind went primal.

Tina seductively twisted away from Kevin, descended the ladder into the captain's room, and got onto the bed. Kevin followed, gulping down more than half of the beer before he lay back on the bed. Tina rolled up onto Kevin and pushed his shirt up. Kevin mimicked Tina's hands pushing up her sequin tube top.

Kevin looked up at the ripped-out hole in the ceiling and then over to the ladder to the galley. "We'd better not… Somebody might come up here or look down from above."

Tina reached for the bed sheet and pulled it up over them. "Now, nobody can see."

Kevin focused on the jagged hole in the ceiling, "Tina, the time is not right. What if someone comes up the ladder? They'll know what we're doing."

Tina leaned forward, her feigned breasts touching Kevin's bare chest. They'd been this far before, and it always ended with Kevin stopping short. She had several boyfriends before Kevin—none had ever rejected her. She wanted to ask why there was reluctance, but kept her thoughts to herself. *Kevin has issues… Maybe he made one of those purity contracts that churches are pushing. He sometimes talks about what his grandfather did to him years ago. Maybe that's it?*

"Let's head on over! I'm ready to dance now." Kevin slid out from under Tina.

"Right now?" Tina asked with a dejected tone.

"Yeah, after I have a beer." Kevin pushed her up and off.

"Okay, let's go join the party," Tina said in a somewhat sour tone.

"Great!" Kevin sprang for the ladder.

Tina pulled on the sequin top and got some white panties and a tiny black skirt from her luggage. "Kevin, I'll be right down. Make me a very weak drink."

"Sure." Kevin opened the refrigerator; it was empty. He remembered Hank letting him rent the Stargazer, which had a non-working galley refrigerator. *How am I going to explain that big hole in the ceiling? Hank was right about renting to college kids.*

Tina came down the ladder. "Our drinks are in the ice chest under the table. Grab my green Pepperdine party bottle."

Kevin got a beer and handed Tina her college water bottle. *Tonight is going to be our night. There's no way I'm going to get wasted like I did last night.*

Navigating around the tied-together houseboats was tricky. Across the water, at least twenty people were on the lower deck, plus a dozen or so on the upper deck, screaming, jamming, and dancing to the music. They worked their way through the bumping bodies to the ladder and up to the upper deck. Tina's white panties contrasted with her dark tan beneath the short black skirt.

Someone yelled, "Mosh Pit!" Then one of the jocks backward flopped onto the crowd on the lower deck. They caught him, passed him around overhead, and tossed him overboard. The Pepperdine cheer squad followed with flops and dives into the mosh pit. It was better than any Girls-Gone-Wild episode. The music increased, as did alcohol consumption.

Three beers later, Kevin stepped over the railing and yelled, "Mosh-Pit!" His pleading to get set down earned an extra ten

seconds overhead before he got tossed into the lake. The cool water was a wake-up call. *Wow, I'm drunk. I'd better swim around to sober up for later.*

Sally tossed a volleyball to Kevin while someone tied a plastic garbage can to one of the houseboats. Out of nowhere, a makeshift water polo court appeared. The volleyball team jumped in with her. The competition turned an informal game against the Jocks into a heated match. Kevin had a flashback to the heated tennis match at the Pasadena Country Club.

Three games later, exhausted and dehydrated, Kevin swam to the Stargazer. It took most of his strength to pull himself onto a pontoon. He bent over at the sink in the galley and gulped water directly from the faucet while looking out the small porthole window for Tina.

Kevin walked around the flotilla, drinking an iced beer and asking if anyone had seen Tina. The two ski boats were the last place to check. The cabin on the bright yellow ski boat had a light on. Kevin was just about to step on board when he got a whiff of Marijuana. Then he heard uncontrollable laughter and froze.

Kevin listened carefully and heard Tim coaxing someone about smoking weed and going skinny dipping. 'Skinny-dipping' was a phrase Kevin didn't like hearing ever since he got caught in the family pool when he turned fourteen.

It shocked Kevin when he heard Tina's voice, "Like, I'll take one hit. I hope Kevin can't smell it. Forget the skinny-dipping. Like Kevin's a big prude about stuff like that."

There was more laughter! "You're right…" followed by deep inhaling. "Preppy boy is too much of a goody-two-shoe to smoke pot and go naked all in the same night. Like, what are we thinking?" Tim's voice bellowed out of the cabin.

Kevin backed off from his eavesdropping position and darted along the three houseboats' walkway. He made it back to the Stargazer without anybody paying any attention. The galley was empty. *So I'm a goody two-shoe. I'll show them. But no matter what, I'm not doing drugs*. *I swore to myself after Richard's son got shot while buying drugs that I would never go down that path.*

He poured half a glass of brown whiskey into a tumbler at the counter and added ice with a splash of ginger ale. When the aluminum screen door opened, he chugged the mixed drink and made another.

"Are you finished playing Water Polo?" Tina asked as she came into the galley.

"Yep, finished," snipped Kevin, not looking back.

From behind, Tina slid her arms around Kevin. "Do you want to go dance?"

"Nope…" He took a long gulp and then wiped at the corner of his mouth.

"Who won?" Tina maneuvered herself into a position between Kevin and the counter.

"The volleyball girls." Kevin quipped as he added whiskey to the tumbler. "Where've you been?"

"Ah… I was talking with Tim. He misses Sue. Like, I think they might get back together." Tina ground herself into Kevin.

"I don't give a crap about Tim. He's a jerk and abuses women. Forget about it." Kevin left the galley with the bourbon and ale.

Tina followed! "What's the problem? Did I do something wrong?"

"It's my problem, and you're right." Kevin gulped bourbon.

"Right about what?" Tina grabbed for Kevin's hand.

"You know, about us, I mean, about me." Kevin took another drink.

"Kevin, you're drunk. I've never seen you this."

"I'm not drunk!" He straightened up to prove it.

"What is your problem? Are you mad at me?"

"I'm such a goody-two-shoes. Ah… I don't smoke pot or go naked. That's what you and jerk boy think?"

"You heard us?"

"I didn't hear anything. I just smelled weed."

"Like, we were just talking. I didn't smoke anything."

"Tina, forget it!" Kevin finished the drink and dumped the ice cubes into the lake. "Here, hold this."

"I'm not your maid." Tina tossed the tumbler into the lake. She was shocked when Kevin pulled off his shorts, stepped on the pontoon, and yelled, "Let's get naked!"

"It's a skinny-dipping party!" echoed between the houseboats. Several guys stripped and joined Kevin. Two girls, wrapped in beach towels, appeared and climbed the water slide. They tossed the towels and slid tandem down the blue fiberglass into the lake.

The cool water had a don't care effect as Kevin swam back to just below where Tina was leaning against the railing. "You coming in?"

"I don't know. Maybe we should talk first."

"Don't be such a prude. Come on in." Kevin smiled with a devilish grin.

Tina vanished into the Stargazer, stripped off her sequin top, and pulled down her black skirt. Through the darkness, a camera flash went off. It took a moment for her eyes to readjust. She heard footsteps hurry down the outside deck toward the waterskiing boats.

She stepped out with just her white panties on and let her arms drop to her side. She used the pontoon ladder to ease into the lake.

Kevin started swimming toward her when something grabbed his leg and pulled him underwater! He kicked free, surfaced, and gasped for air. It grabbed his leg again! Kevin kicked free again, swam back to the Stargazer as fast as he could, and scrambled on deck.

Scurrying up and down the deck, Kevin noticed air bubbles coming from where he'd just swam. The air bubbles went right under the Stargazer. Kevin rushed to the opposite side of the lower deck when a swim mask appeared. Frank pulled the scuba regulator out of his mouth and started laughing.

Kevin stooped down. "You bastard. You scared the hell out of me!"

"It wasn't me. It was 'Jaws' that got you," Frank laughed harder.

"You're an ass. I could have drowned."

Frank pulled himself onto the bow of the Stargazer. "Looks like the cold water causes shrinkage. Frank pointed."

Kevin looked down. "Probably too much booze."

Frank pulled off the mask and tossed it on the deck. "You can use my equipment if you want."

Kevin stood tall and spied out across the artificial lagoon. At least three dozen naked bodies were swimming inside the flotilla. Kevin could make out Tina's blond hair on the far side, holding on to a houseboat. "Can I use the swim fins?"

"Sure, do you want the tank?" "No, I can make it across the lagoon without a tank," Kevin put on the swim fins and slipped into the lake.

"Here, take this," Frank tossed the swim mask to Kevin.

With the mask over his eyes and nose, Kevin took a deep breath and swam under the Stargazer. He surfaced to get his bearings, retook a deep breath, and dove underwater. Someone on the surface was swimming in the same direction. Kevin kicked harder, swam under Tina, and quietly surfaced underneath the houseboat. He worked himself along the inward side of the pontoon opposite Tina.

There was the sound of splashing water, followed by laughter. "Tim, go away! I'm waiting for Kevin."

"I don't see him. Maybe that water polo loser passed out?" A hollow tin can thumped sound when Tim's hand latched onto the aluminum pontoon.

Kevin grabbed a crossbeam under the houseboat, pulled the swim mask onto his forehead, and listened.

"I just want to take a better look at your boobs." Kevin heard Tim's words perfectly.

"Tim, don't be so fresh." Tim's words made her think about the camera flash that went off when she stripped.

"I know that you had plastic surgery. I just wanted to see how good a job your surgeon did." Kevin heard the sound of hands moving on the aluminum pontoon.

"Who told you I had plastic surgery?" Tina demanded an answer.

"Ah…" Tim didn't answer.

"Did Sue tell you?" Tina scowled with her hazel greenish eyes and then grinned.

"She told me that your stepdad paid for your implants after you graduated from high school. She's thinking about a boob job."

"Now that she's PG, she won't need to."

"Yeah, I noticed; her butt is getting bigger too!"

"Tim, that's not nice. That's your child making her bigger. You'll be a father soon."

"Yeah, maybe?" Tim replied almost inaudibly.

Kevin listened hard for Tina's reply.

"Well, like I've been telling you. That's something between you and Sue."

"Yeah, I know." Tim resolutely replied. "Tina, I can't tell you how much I appreciate you listening to all my problems these last few days."

"Like I wouldn't listen? Sue's my best friend."

"I wish I had more friends like you."

"I'm your friend, but I must find Kevin now." Tina swam off.

Kevin let go of the aluminum crossbeam, sank underwater, and then kicked hard. He made it to the far side of Stargazer without surfacing. He tossed the swim fins up on the deck, climbed up the ladder, pulled the mask off, and hurried to the other side.

Swimming with her head above water so as not to get her hair wet, Tina caught Kevin rounding the bow of the Stargazer. She yelled, "Kevin, where have you been?"

"I needed to help Frank with his scuba equipment," Kevin said from the deck.

"Are you coming in, or are you going to stand there naked all night?" Tina asked.

Kevin looked down; he'd forgotten about stripping. "Ah… I'll be right back. I need to make myself another drink first."

"Can you make me a drink too?" Tina asked as she held on to the side of the Stargazer pontoon. "My green water bottle is on the counter."

"Sure!" Kevin bent over to put on his Blues Devil basketball shorts.

"Why are you putting those back on?" Tina asked.

"I'm not going into the galley naked. Food and snacks are lying around. That would be disgusting."

Little by little, Kevin pulled his shorts on and then steadied himself using the railing. The slap of the screen door sounded as loud as a firecracker. He switched on the light; the illumination felt like a bolt of lightning. He found another glass tumbler in the cupboard. More whiskey got poured on the counter than in the glass. The houseboat started rolling. Kevin steadied himself on the ladder up to the bedrooms.

Tina came through the door. "Are you okay?"

"Ah… I think all the sun… The waterskiing and stuff…" Kevin hiccupped. "Whiskey and ginger ale don't mix well either."

"If you want, we can go upstairs now."

"That sounds good." The rolling turned to spinning.

"I'll go say goodnight to the girls and be back." Tina grabbed her green metal flask and noticed Kevin staring at it. "Don't worry, it's just my ice water."

"I'm not worried about that. Are you going to anything on?"

Tina looked down. "Of course. I hope you're liking what you're looking at. I'm all yours tonight."

The cool, fresh air on the upper deck helped somewhat calm the sloshing skull mush. Kevin pulled off some lounge cushions and made up a bed. Then he turned the lounge chairs on their sides to make a makeshift privacy wall. The high vantage point from the top deck felt like a lookout with a sense of seclusion. He went below and returned with sheets and pillows.

The song 'Lay Lady Lay' softly rolled over the water from across the way, a soothing relief to the nonstop heavy metal moss pit music. Kevin's head wouldn't stop spinning. He got down on his knees to steady himself. It took all his effort to focus on the party barge. Tina was dancing and flowing to the music all by herself. She was as seductive as when Salome danced for King Herod. *Tina is so beautiful. Tonight is going to be the night—*

The lime-green water bottle entered Kevin's blurred vision as Tim moved across the dance floor. He handed a virgin strawberry daiquiri to Tina. The music switched from the low-key Mixolydian of Lay Lady Lay to a blaring three-kick repeating rap of—She Wants It.

Kevin fell sideways as he tried to get off his knees. He rolled onto his back—a lone shooting star was the last thing he saw.

Chap 6——————Date Rape Drug

The morning sun broke over the rim of the reservoir and hit Tina directly in the face. She groggily pulled the blanket over her head and immediately pulled it back down. *Where am I? What happened? I hurt inside…* Tina rubbed at her lower stomach. *I remember dancing. Then Tim handed me my water bottle. Then…*

Tim emerged from the small cabin of the yellow ski boat, stretched his arms, and boasted, "That was some party last night."

A horrible thought came to Tina when she felt the elastic band on her black miniskirt stretched and twisted. "What happened last night?" Tina demanded.

Tim came over and sat on the bench seat. "Tina, nothing happened. You know that we're just friends. I'll always look after you."

Tina put her brain in rewind. *Kevin made me a light drink, mainly ice. I drank a lot the night before. Last night, I was so careful not to drink too much.*

"Anyway, you told me Kevin was so drunk he passed out. So I folded down the boat seat for you."

"I said, Kevin passed out?" Tina questioned while she rubbed her throbbing head.

"Something like that, but never mind. I looked after you."

"Don't never mind me! What else did I say?" Tina demanded answers.

"You said a lot. I'd been going on about Sue and me. So I guess you just wanted to let me know that you and Kevin are having sexual problems, too."

"We don't have problems. We've never gone all the way." Tina halted to rub her pounding head. *I wouldn't have told Tim about Kevin's moral hang-up. The only person I've ever said anything to is Sue.*

Tim eased Tina's hand from her forehead. "You're the best female friend that I've ever had. I've never been able to talk to anybody as I can talk to you. If it weren't for Sue putting me in this predicament." Tim massaged Tina's hand.

"That's not a fair thing to say about Sue."

"You're right, but after what we discussed last night." Tim hesitated. "Hey, there's Kevin up on the top deck!"

Tina jerked her hand away from Tim. "Kevin!" Tina yelled. She tossed the blanket aside, stood up, and shouted again. "Kevin!"

The distance from the ski boat to a houseboat was at least twenty feet, way too far for Tina to jump. Tim pulled on the blue and white ski rope, closing the space. Tina leaped to the deck of

the houseboat, ran down the outside, and then jumped onto the Stargazer. Passing through the Captain's room, she noticed the bedding was missing. Up on the top deck, she saw how Kevin had laid out the cushions and made up a place for them to sleep. Kevin was gone!

She scanned the other houseboats and then located Kevin on the bow of the Stargazer with a fishing pole. She watched him cast several times. Something wasn't right. Her lower belly ached, and her white panties were stretched and slipping down. She went down one level, undressed, and put on clean underwear, cotton shorts, and a sleeveless top. In the head, she wiped off some smeared eyeliner and lip gloss. Staring into the mirror, frozen in a daze, she told herself, "I hope Kevin will understand."

Tina stepped over scuba equipment on the lower outside deck and slowly approached. "Kevin, I'm so sorry about last night. I fell asleep or something. I don't know what happened."

Kevin cast the pole and didn't turn around. "Don't worry about it. You don't owe me an explanation. The last thing I saw was you slow dancing in Tim's arms."

"Kevin, nothing happened. Can we talk?" Tina pleaded.

"There's nothing for us to talk about. Plus, it's none of my business!" Kevin started reeling in the fishing line.

"We do need to talk! Like, I don't know what happened. Yes, I was dancing by myself. Then Tim brought me my water bottle after the music turned to hip-hop. After that, I don't remember anything." Tina rubbed at her forehead.

"What kind of drink was it?"

"A non-alcoholic strawberry daiquiri. You know they're called virgins." Tina forced a smile, although her head was throbbing.

Kevin turned away and cast the fishing pole. "Tina, it's okay. I can deal with it. Tim's a cooler, savvier guy than I am. Hey, he was the captain of the Blue Devils. He's going to be a doctor. He's got it all. He probably even got you."

Tears started coming down Tina's face. "Kevin, please stop! I saw how you made the bed up on the deck. I wanted to be with you last night. I blew it! I'm sorry. I don't know what happened!" The tears flowed.

"I know what happened! You slept on Tim's ski boat last night. I spotted you there this morning after waiting most of the night." Now Kevin noticed something way out on the lake.

"The cops are coming! The cops are coming!" Someone shouted out a warning from one of the houseboats across the way.

Frank busted out of the screen door on the smaller houseboat with a set of binoculars. "Two sheriff boats are headed this way! Their lights are on, and they have us in their sights." Frank yelled across the artificial lagoon.

Kevin squinted into the rising sun. On the horizon, two aluminum boats were at full speed. Blaring sirens could be heard. It turned into a frenzy as people emerged from sleeping bags, rolled out of beds, pulled on clothes, and began digging through their backpacks.

Kevin turned back. Tina was gone! Inside the galley, he climbed halfway up the ladder. Tina had her back to him, digging through her luggage. She pulled out a makeup bag and dumped it. Nail polish, makeup, combs, and other items hit the floor. She scrambled for a brown pill bottle, still rolling in circles on the floor. Tina grabbed the bottle.

"Tina, what's going on?"

"Nothing!" she replied, getting up off her knees.

"What are those pills?" Kevin asked as he climbed the rest of the way into the room.

"They're just diet pills that my stepdad gets for me."

"Diet pills, then why the panic?"

"They're not over the counter. I don't have a prescription for them."

"Oh," responded Kevin as he stepped to the side to watch Tina enter the head, and then the toilet flushed. He looked through the things on the floor and found more pills in a round blue container. "What about these?"

"Those are okay. They are birth control pills."

"Oh—" Kevin handed the blue plastic container to Tina.

The real drug clearing was happening at the open end of the flotilla. Tim and Stan were on the yellow ski boat, digging out their stash. Stan dumped three grams of cocaine over the side of the ski boat. The white powder didn't sink—it floated on the water. For sure, the baggies of marijuana wouldn't sink. With the sheriff boats no more than two hundred yards away, Tim flipped up one of the cushions and snatched onto a metal toolbox. He dumped wrenches, spark plugs, and starting fluid on the floor in the tiny cabin. He dug out an eyedropper bottle of blue liquid called Rohypnol or Roofie from his pocket. Stan put four bags of marijuana inside the toolbox. Tim put wrenches on the drugs and snapped the toolbox latch closed.

He casually moved to the back of the yellow ski boat, and as the patrol boats slowed, Tim leaned over the side and acted like he was securing the anchor rope. The toolbox sank.

The boats split up, going in opposite directions around the flotilla. One boat slowly idled by. Tim sat back on the motor cowling and waved. "Good morning, sir. It sure is a beautiful day." Abruptly, his stomach knotted—Tina's lime green water bottle was swinging in a cup holder on the transom.

The other Sheriff's boat stopped in the center. "Is Mr. Kevin Trask onboard?" Blasted from the bullhorn.

Kevin waved with the fishing pole. "I'm Kevin Trask."

The Sheriff idled over to the bow of the Stargazer. "Do you have your ID?"

"Yes, Sir, upstairs," Kevin answered.

The Sheriff pulled out a black card from under the clip of his clipboard. "Do you know anything about this business card?"

"Yeah, it's a 'Trask' corporate business card with our private number," Kevin replied.

"Do you hand them out to everyone?"

"Not that one; it has my dad's private phone number on it," Kevin replied, then had a memory flash. "I did give one of our private cards to the dock boy a couple of days ago." Kevin rubbed his head. "I rented this houseboat from his Dad."

"Didn't you also give Benny a ride in your sports car?"

"Yes, I did," Kevin answered.

"Where have you been for the last few days?"

"Right here on this houseboat. Is there a problem?"

"Mr. Trask, I'll ask the questions." The overweight officer noticed the fit and trim athletes gathering. "If anyone can verify that Mr. Trask was here for the last three days and nights, come forward."

Tina quickly approached. "Officer, I can vouch that Kevin was with me all night."

"And your name, young lady?" butted in the short, husky deputy, eyeballing Tina head to toe.

"Tina Williams. Kevin Trask is my boyfriend."

The junior officer wrote Tina's full name on his pad. "Then you were with him all night?"

"Yeah, we barbequed, he played water polo, and I danced until after midnight," Tina answered.

"What time did you two go to bed?" The stocky deputy asked with a pen to paper.

"I went to bed sometime after ten-thirty," Kevin answered.

"Your girlfriend just said that it was around midnight!"

"I felt ill and went to bed alone," Kevin answered. "Is all this necessary?" Kevin asked with an impatient tone.

"Yes, and if need be, I'll handcuff you and take you into Redding. You can answer my questions down at the station."

"For what? Just because we had a party last night." Kevin quipped loudly.

"I can do what I want. You're under arrest." The short deputy unclipped handcuffs from his gun belt.

Kevin's basketball reflex was to bat away the arm irons. They splashed into the lake. "What are you nuts? Put handcuffs on someone in a boat. What if I fell overboard?"

"Now you are in real trouble." The deputy drew his Colt 457 magnum.

"Jack! Put your gun away!" The Sheriff yelled over the bullhorn and maneuvered beside the deputy's boat.

"Put me under arrest without cause, and I'll have your badge," Kevin warned.

The Sheriff stepped in. "We are out here because we need information on a young dock boy with a Trask business card and ten dollars tucked in his backpack."

Kevin backed away from the junior officer and spoke to the Sheriff. "Benny made some phone calls for me. I gave him money for the long-distance fees. I also gave him a ride in my car."

The Sheriff shut off his boat and moved in front of Kevin. "That young boy was found dead in the boat repair building last night!"

"Dead!" Kevin steadied himself on the railing.

There was a ghastly stillness in the brisk morning air as the words, 'Dead boy,' spread.

Tim motioned the other patrol boat over to the yellow ski boat. After a few minutes of discussion, Deputy Jack Prichard maneuvered his boat next to the Sheriff's boat and motioned for Tina to come closer. "Ms. Williams, the basketball team captain, says that you were with him last night, from around 10:00 pm until 7:00 am this morning."

Those words spread faster than the 'Found Dead' words had.

Frank whispered to Laura, "The last time I saw Kevin was last night when he used my scuba gear."

Laura replied, "I saw Tina dancing with Tim. I never did see Kevin after the water polo games."

Stan slammed the lid on an ice cooler, stood on it with a beer in his hand, and yelled out. "Last night, I saw Tina skinny dipping. I didn't see Kevin. But damn, she's one hot lady!"

With disgust, Patty walked away from Stan. Three days of his crudeness were enough. Their friends-with-benefits arrangement made her feel cheap—always. Especially since Stan made sure he let everyone know about their arrangement before he passed out. "Sir, I was with Kevin last night."

"You're not going to lie to me as this girl did?" Sheriff Wilson pointed at Tina.

"No, sir! I wouldn't lie to you. Frank, Laura, Kevin, and I had dinner the first night on the lake after Stan passed out. When Frank and Laura returned to their houseboat, Kevin and I slept under the stars—all night." Patty rambled out.

"Did you sleep, or was it sex?" Deputy Prichard butted in with a perverted smirk.

Patty glared with the 'I could kill you' look. Then, carefully choose her words. "Both, Kevin ravaged me off and on for hours. And we slept a little bit, too."

"What about last night?" The deputy readied his pencil.

"Same thing, only better. Stan had passed out again. Then I snuck back up to be with Kevin. It was the best sex ever."

Now Tina shot the 'I could kill you' glare at Patty while Tim breathed a sigh of relief.

"I'm done with this BS! I'm taking you two into Redding!" Sheriff Wilson pointed at Patty and Kevin.

"Boss, I should take the whore in my boat so the two of them can't put a story together." Sheriff Wilson agreed. This could be an opportunity to beef up his legacy near the end of a lackadaisical thirty-year career patrolling Lake Shasta.

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Kevin made one phone call from jail in Redding, California, to contact the Trask corporate attorney. Senator Byron Shepherd showed up at the Lake Patrol Department within four hours. Kevin hated playing the privileged elitist card, but the sight of Patty behind bars in nothing more than a skimpy green bikini required action.

The door to the interrogation room swung open, and a short, balding man with a scruffy grey beard came in. "I'm Senator Byron D Shepard. The Trask Inc. attorney called and said that one of my constituents needed help."

Kevin was unable to offer a handshake because he was handcuffed to a table. "Sir, we were being questioned about the death of a young boy on Shasta Lake. Things got heated when the deputy turned full-on short-guy syndrome. He's been talking trash to Patty all the way here. He keeps calling her a whore."

"Is that your young lady friend in the front cell?"

"Yes, that's Patty. She stepped up to be my alibi and got caught in a lie. The deputy pulled his gun and arrested us. That's when Sheriff Wilson let his understudy take over, and we ended up here," replied Kevin.

Senator Shepard yanked open the interrogation room door and yelled down the hall. "Sheriff Wilson, get in here, now!"

The moment the Sheriff entered the room, the Senator let loose. "Why haven't you given that young lady a robe or something? You put her on display like a stripper in a cage at a club."

"That college brat called my deputy a pig," Sheriff Wilson spouted

"Was that before or after he pulled his weapon in a National Park?"

"It was after. Deputy Pritchard tried to put her in an armbar, but she kept twisting loose. He's not that strong."

"So he pulled his gun on Ms. Kelly because he couldn't restrain her? It was obvious that she could not possibly have a weapon."

"Deputy Pritchard is still learning the ropes," Sheriff Wilson butted in.

"And who is teaching him the ropes?" Senator Byron's face was turning red with rage. "Uncuff Mr. Trask now!"

"My deputy didn't fire his weapon." Sheriff Wilson offered up while uncuffing Kevin.

"FYI, last week, my office in Sacramento took a report about park enforcement shooting at people where Redwoods are getting cleared."

"Those punk-ass hippies are all liars. They're up there in the forest smoking pot and spreading VD. I have the authority to call the National Guard in and shoot the bastards." Sheriff Wilson bellowed.

"My son is one of the bastards up there protesting the clear-cutting of old-growth Sequoias," snapped back the Senator while pushing his finger into Sheriff Wilson's chest. "Go find something for that young woman to put on."

The Senator left the room and found Deputy Pritchard in an office chair, rolling back and forth in front of the jail, harassing Patty. "Deputy Pritchard, I'd like to look at your weapon. It looks like a Colt revolver. I thought the standard issue was nine millimeters."

Deputy Pritchard stood and handed over his gun. "This is my personal sidearm. It can stop a car if need be."

The Senator took the gun. "Trade places with the young lady in the cell!" Pritchard lunged toward the Senator and then froze when the 45-caliber barrel got pointed at his chest. "This is your last day on the job. Mr. Prick—hard!"

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In less than an hour, Kevin and Patty were being chauffeured in a black Suburban to Bridge Bay Resort by a security detail at the senator's orders. Patty had on khaki green forest service pants, a Smokey the Bear tourist shirt, and new Danner hiking boots, all courtesy of the Sheriff's Office.

When the detail driver turned into the parking lot, Kevin pointed to the left. "Over there by the Mercedes convertible."

The burly agent wheeled a sweeping one-eighty without braking and halted in front of the Mercedes. The other military-type jumped out and opened the door for Patty. "Sorry, Ma'am, we're not all like rental cops." The Suburban sped off. It was past noon and already ninety degrees.

Frank and Laura had been waiting and watching from the restaurant. They hurried out the door and across the parking lot. "Kevin," Frank yelled from about twenty yards away.

Kevin looked back over his shoulder. "I'm thinking about taking off. I want to show some respect for a deceased child," Kevin said when Frank and Laura approached.

"It's so sad about that young boy. Do they think it was foul play?" Laura asked.

"I think those idiot park cops are trying to make it into more than it is. My twin sister died from cancer. The first time I saw Benny, I prayed for his suffering to be in God's hands." Patty quietly spoke and cast her head downward to pray again.

"I didn't know you had a twin Sister," Kevin said.

Laura walked over to Patty and hugged her. "I think about Cecelia often. You fought hard for her and also suffered."

"Thanks, Laura. You were such a good friend to Cecelia," replied Patty.

"We had the best time, the three of us hanging out in high school," Laura replied and hugged Patty tighter.

"Kevin, I can take you to the Stargazer before we take off," Frank offered.

Kevin looked across the parking lot toward the lake and saw the yellow crime scene tape wrapped around the boat repair building. "I don't want to go back out on the lake. But I do need to bring back the Stargazer."

"I can skipper the houseboat back. I used to pilot my dad's boat over the Ilwaco Bar when we went salmon fishing." Laura offered.

"Can I come back with you two?" Patty asked. "Stan has been suggesting a lot of weird sexual stuff and taking Ecstasy. I don't want any part of it."

"Crap!" Kevin said he saw the boat rental shack. "I forgot about the Stargazer railing and upper deck damage."

"It was Stan who broke off the railing," Patty confessed. "He told me not to say anything. I'll help pay for the damage since I came to the lake with him."

"You don't have to pay for Stan's actions," Laura said. "He needs to pay for the damage. He has a drinking problem."

"He is an obnoxious ass when he drinks." Frank added, "He drinks way too much."

Kevin asked, "Would you three bring the Stargazer back to the boat rental dock? I don't want to confront Tina."

"Not a problem," answered Frank. "Laura and Patty can follow with the smaller party barge."

"What about Tina?" Patty asked.

Kevin ran his fingers through his reddish-brown hair. "That's up to her. I think she's with Tim now. Plus, I need to deal with something else at the moment."

"I'll talk to Tina," Patty offered. "She turned weird from whatever she was drinking last night."

"I made her a light strawberry daiquiri." Kevin took note of the custom yellow pickup in the parking lot. "I forgot. Tina rode up with Tim. She can ride back with him."

"I'll let her know," Laura said.

"Thanks," Kevin said, heading across the parking lot and stopping at the top of the dock ramp. *I can't go down there.* Kevin made an about-face. *I'll see if that waitress is working.*

Inside the restaurant, Kevin took a seat at the counter. "Coffee this morning, Mr. Trask?" The seasoned waitress asked in a downcast tone.

"No thanks," Kevin replied.

"That was a terrible thing about Benny," the waitress said.

"It sure was. He seemed like such a good helper." Kevin got choked up.

"He was. The cops say he was inhaling stuff. It just isn't true."

"It could have been fiberglass resin. We use it when we build cargo trailers," Kevin said almost inaudibly.

"That could be it," Edna replied. "You should tell the police."

Kevin frowned. "I just dealt with the Shasta Lake Patrol."

"That lazy-ass Sheriff is worthless. His deputy is worse," Edna replied.

"What about his older brother? Deputy Pritchard alluded that he was a drug user and was selling drugs."

"You're talking about Conrad." Edna leaned across the counter so as not to be overheard. "He got into some trouble with drugs. Benny was the good one. I know for sure he wasn't sniffing glue or resin."

"If his older brother was doing dope, that's a lot of peer pressure."

"Listen here, Mr. High and Mighty! Conrad smokes a little marijuana, but he isn't a bad kid. I bet you rich college kids are doing more drugs out there on the lake than Conrad will ever experiment with."

"Not me." Kevin quipped.

"Not even drinking booze? Half of your group is probably underage. I saw a couple of sixteen-year-olds from town get on a ski boat."

"I'm old enough to drink. I have never tried pot because I was on a basketball scholarship. Plus, a son of a Trask employee got shot while buying weed." Kevin replied.

"Well, good for you." Edna quipped. "I offered to give Benny some weed when he started Chemo."

"I came in here to ask a favor." Kevin paused, swallowed, and then went on. "One of the guys damaged the houseboat that I rented from Benny's father. I want to make sure that it gets taken care of."

"I bet that guy was drunk or stoned?" Edna replied and rolled her eyes.

"Probably both," Kevin said. "Anyway, I'll call the Trask corporate secretary and have a check cut for the houseboat rental company. If Condi overnights the check to you, could you ensure the rental shop gets the check?"

"I can do that," Edna replied while writing her mailing information on a pad. She tore out a light green page and gave it to him.

"Thanks." Kevin took the address, put a twenty on the counter, and walked toward the door.

"Mr. Trask, there's one last thing."

Kevin halted and turned. "What's that?"

"Did you get Benny's card?"

"What?" Kevin walked back. "What are you talking about?"

"Benny left you a note on your car."

"What note? I didn't see anything on my car."

"I know he left you something because he set off the car alarm, putting it under the wiper blade. Your car alarm has gone off a couple of different times."

"Benny left me a note?" Kevin walked up to the counter.

"Yeah, after you let him drive your car. It was most likely a thank-you card," Edna replied while working herself down the counter, refilling coffee cups.

Kevin hurried out of the restaurant and across the parking lot. There was no note on the windshield. One wiper blade was a good distance from the chrome windshield frame. He looked around the parking lot and then under the car. A folded piece of paper was near a tire. Kevin lay on the hot asphalt and reached around the right front wheel. The thank you card was soaking in a puddle of brake fluid.

Chap 7——————Why not me, God?

Kevin drove east on the road away from the dark malevolence—disguised as a graduation party. *That's the on-ramp Benny told me to take. He saved my life up on Trinity Campground Loop only to die a day later—God, how is that fair?* The SL600 shot across the overpass at over 70mph. Kevin yanked the steering wheel to the left. The concept car hugged the sweeping corner and exited the ramp onto Interstate 5 North at 80mph.

In less than two hours, Kevin had crossed the border into Oregon. He had only applied the brakes once to slow down for a dust cloud from a farmer plowing a field. The dust had been like a brown fog across the interstate, and some blowing dirt had landed on the Mercedes. When he accelerated to over 100mph, most of the soil blew off the hood, but the smaller particles dusted the windshield with fine brown powder. Kevin glanced around the dashboard for a windshield fluid knob and didn't locate it. *I'll pull off at the next town, get fuel, and clean the windshield. I need to get money wired to Edna at the restaurant for the damage to the houseboat.*

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"You want it filled up?" asked the attendant.

"Yes, fill it up with premium," Kevin said, wiping the tiredness from his eyes.

"Sir, you'll have to pop the gas latch." Kevin looked around for the gas lid release. "Try next to the seat," the attendant yelled. The gas lid sprang open. There was a slight vibration as the attendant inserted the nozzle.

"You want me to clean the windshield?"

"Yes," Kevin yelled out the side window.

"Cool car. I'll use air to blow that sand off those gritty spots." The attendant pointed at some spots above the wiper blade.

Kevin noticed that the oily dust spots formed a thumb, palm, and fingerprints. He jumped out. "Don't blow off the windshield!"

"No problem. I don't want to scratch the glass on an expensive concept car like this."

Kevin went to the passenger side and put his thumb and finger just over the oily spots, careful not to touch the glass. *These can't be Benny's prints. They're way too big. The waitress said Benny left a note on the windshield. And the alarm went off several times.*

The gas clicked off. The attendant reattached the nozzle to the pump. "Anything else, sir?" he asked.

"No, that's it. I just needed gas," Kevin leaned in through the passenger side, opened the glove box, and retrieved a corporate fuel card.

"We don't take credit cards. It says right there, cash only." The attendant pointed toward a sign.

Kevin dug in his pockets and handed the attendant a fifty. He focused on the fingerprints embedded in brown dust on the windshield.

"Here's your change."

Kevin stood up from his bent position over the hood. "Do you have a piece of tape I can have?"

"I got some duct tape." Jeff held out bills and change in his fist.

"Do you have any wide, clear packing tape?"

"Maybe, let me go check. Here's your change."

"Keep it. I might need some more help." Kevin turned back and mirrored his thumb and fingers without touching the glass. *These are too large and spaced too far apart to be from a child.*

Jeff returned with a tape gun. "Will this work?"

"It should. I'll bring it back when I'm done."

"Not a problem." Jeff then hurried to another car that had pulled to a gas pump.

Kevin pulled the wiper blade out and off the windshield, careful not to disturb the dust. He put tape strips on the glass to cover the prints and then peeled off one piece of the clear tape. *Wow, that worked. Now, I need a clean white piece of paper.*

"What happened? Did you get a crack in your windshield?" asked a scruffy-looking man behind the counter.

"No, I'm doing some detective work. Do you have a clean white paper on which I can stick this hunk of tape?"

"Might be something in the back, but I can't leave the cash register unattended. Wait until Jeff gets done with that customer," the station owner pointed outside.

"Is there a phone I can use to make a collect call? I've been trying from my car but haven't had any luck."

"Those new-fangled car phones don't work around here. There's the payphone." The owner now pointed to the back corner of the convenience store.

"Thanks, I need to stick this on something first."

The owner pulled a brochure from a slotted advertisement rack. "Can you use this? They're blank on the back." He opened the tri-fold brochure, flipped it over, and put it on the counter.

Kevin carefully stuck the piece of tape on the blank back. "That works."

"Hey, that's cool, you got someone's fingerprints."

"Yeah, it's something I saw them do on one of the crime shows on television," Kevin replied as he headed for the payphone.

The operator asked Condi if she would accept a collect call. "Yes," came through the handset.

"Condi, it's Kevin. I need five thousand dollars sent to…" Kevin pulled a napkin from his pocket. "Send the money to the Big Dipper Café at Shasta Lake."

"Is that the same PO box I sent money for the houseboat rental?" Condi asked

"Should be. But make it attention, Edna Daly."

Jeff stuck his head in through the door and shouted at Kevin. "Mister, you need to move your car. A fuel tanker needs to pull in."

"I'll call back from the car phone when I get a strong signal. Please overnight the money." Kevin slapped the handset into the chrome claw hanger and dashed out. He tossed the tri-fold brochure onto the passenger seat and pulled around to the back. The second piece of tape was more difficult to remove from the windshield.

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Again, headed north on Interstate 5 with no destination in mind, the V12 got pushed hard. Kevin hadn't noticed the Oregon State Police tailing a few cars back. The red and blue flashing lights snapped Kevin back to reality. He glanced at the speedometer. *Oh crap, I'm almost doing one hundred miles per hour. Oh no, the brakes feel soft*. *God help me!*

It took Kevin over half a mile to pull over and come to a complete stop. Annoyed, the officer approached and demanded, "License and registration. No quick movements. Do you have any weapons?"

"No weapons," replied Kevin while slowly handing over his driver's license. "I'm not sure about the registration." Kevin leaned over and opened the glove box.

"Don't get out of your car!" The State Police officer took the driver's license and returned to the patrol car to run information.

Kevin started searching. *I don't know where the registration is. I don't want to get hauled off to jail again. I'll call Condi.* Kevin looked at the bag phone; the signal status bars were nonexistent.

He tried to call anyway, but there was nothing, not even a dial tone.

The officer returned to the passenger side. "At the speed you were traveling, you would go right under one of these slow-moving semi-trailers and get decapitated in this low-riding sports car."

"You're right, officer," Kevin replied nervously. "I've only had the car for a few weeks. I'm not used to this high-performance motor."

"FYI, this car is registered with Hung Meng Imports. You only have thirty days to re-title a car." The officer tore off the yellow ticket from a pad and handed it to Kevin with his driver's license, "Slow down. If you don't, you could die!"

Kevin opened the glove box and tossed the ticket inside*. Thank God I'm not going to jail. This car is double trouble! I'll get the title changed from Hung Meng Imports to my name and trade it for something less flashy.*

The cruise control held the Mercedes at 64 mph for over an hour. There was a moderate amount of traffic coming into Medford, Oregon. Kevin slowed, taking note of the soft brake pedal. With Medford in the rearview mirror, Kevin bumped the cruise control up to 74 mph. The music automatically increased from the six speakers. A barely audible chirping went off. Kevin switched off the cruise control and then turned down the stereo. As the SL600 decelerated, he scanned the dashboard for the source of the noise.

The sound came from the black nylon bag, and he put the handset to his ear. "Kevin, I've been trying to call all afternoon. Robert wants to talk to you before he goes to the club."

"Sorry about that. This phone only works around big cities."

"What big city are you around?"

"I'm almost to Myrtle Creek, Oregon."

"Here's your dad. Godspeed in that new car." Condi transferred the call.

"Kevin, what's going on? I got a call from the Shasta Lake police this morning about a young boy who had our private phone number and some cash on him. Then you called our law offices. What the hell's going on?"

"Dad, I gave one of our private business cards to a dock boy at Shasta Lake. They found it on him with the money I gave him."

"Found it on him! What does that mean?"

"The young boy—his name was Benny." Kevin took a deep breath. "They found him dead in a repair shop."

"Dead! What the hell? Are we going to be in another big lawsuit? Is that why you're having Condi send money?"

"It has nothing to do with us. The fragile child died from inhaling fiberglass fumes or something. Benny was on chemo. The money is for damage to the houseboat I rented."

"Was he working in an unventilated shop or something?"

"I don't know. The lake patrol police think Benny was sniffing fumes or could have been doing drugs."

"So this kid was a doper and had one of our business cards and cash on him?" Trask senior paused before he asked, "You weren't buying drugs from him, were you?"

Kevin took the phone away from his head. *Crap, my father doesn't trust me. He knows how I feel about dope, especially after Richard's son got shot buying marijuana. I promised the day of Jabbar's funeral, I'd never get the drug monkey on my back.*

Kevin put the phone back up to his ear. "Dad, I don't do drugs. That's one of the reasons I left Shasta Lake early. I have a lot on my mind. Tina and I are having some issues and …"

"I don't care about the problems with your girlfriend. We have bigger problems in the manufacturing plant. Remember, you told me you'd be back in a few weeks."

"I have to go! I shouldn't drive and talk on this mobile phone at the same time. If you don't care about my problems, I don't care about what's happening in the plant." Kevin hit the '**End**' button and tossed the handset onto the passenger seat.

He didn't get two miles up the interstate before the bag phone chirped. "Kevin, your dad wants to know where you are headed and how to reach you."

"Hold on, I need to pull over." Kevin put on the right blinker. Braking the SL600 to a stop took almost a quarter mile.

Kevin retrieved the tri-fold brochure from the glove box. The words: **GET AWAY FROM IT ALL! VISIT ZIGZAG, OREGON. FISH THE SANDY RIVER.** Blurred into Kevin's tired eyes. "I will be fishing on the Sandy River."

"Where's that at?" Condi asked.

"Oregon." Kevin opened the brochure and quickly scanned for a map. "The guide shop is between Zigzag and Government Camp, Oregon."

"I need a phone number to keep the boss happy."

To schedule a guided fishing trip, call: 504-665-FISH, was the last line of the advertisement. Kevin read, "Five zero four dash six six five and then F-I-S-H."

"Got it!" Jotting down the four letters jarred Condi's memory. "Kevin, I almost forgot. Two days ago, I wrote something for you that got recorded on the Trask private line."

"What was it?" Kevin replied and waited. In the rearview mirror, he noticed his bloodshot eyes—he needed sleep.

"Here it is. The message was 'brake check jerks."

Kevin scribbled the information on the back of the brochure next to the fingerprints. "Thanks. I need to get some coffee and something to eat. It has been a long day."

"Godspeed," Condi offered up for the second time that day.

Kevin tossed the handset and brochure onto the passenger seat and merged back into traffic. *I'd better be careful if some jerk brake checks me. I could never stop in time. Thank God for that mystical recording.* Mind numb. He forgot to set the cruise control as the V12 slowly pushed the SL600 past 90 mph. Kevin yawned, looked at his bloodshot eyes, and forgot to put on the right blinker.

I need some strong coffee! Kevin pulled off Interstate 5 and then crossed the Umpqua River. He slowed to a crawl down Main Street and chuckled while reading the **WELCOME TO MYRTLE CREEK — POPULATION 3325** sign**.** Kevin chided himself. *There is no cell service in this tiny Podunk town.* He saw a dingy cafe with a 4WD truck, three motorcycles, and a beat-up white Buick parked in the gravel parking lot. Kevin pulled between the four-door Buick and the pickup and grabbed the brochure. Getting out of the SL600, he noted two child car seats in the back of the white Buick, a Confederate flag, and a gun rack hung on display in the rear window of the 4WD pickup. Two of the three motorcycles were full-dress Harley-Davidsons.

A cluster of bells hanging on the back of the door jingled through the thick air as he pushed the heavy wood door open. The rustic interior and a giant round saw blade with the menu painted on it warned that this was a place for the unruly outdoor type. The chairs were cut out of old whiskey barrels, and the tables were made from thick wood planking. The faint smell of bacon and coffee lingered in the stale air.

From an arched doorway at the far-left corner of the cafe, a man in a grease-stained white apron hanging low around his oversized waist appeared, "What do you need, Sonny?"

"Coffee and directions, Sir," Kevin motioned with the fishing brochure overhead.

"Don't be calling me Sir!" The weighty bald cook bellowed out. There was instant animosity the moment the cook looked Kevin up and down. Wealth and privilege are attributes that can't be hidden. Alburn-styled hair, dark tan, and perfect white teeth

were things Kevin took for granted—stuff this cook resented.

"If you're open for food, I could use coffee and something to eat?"

"We're open if you don't mind eating in the bar," the cook replied, then canted his head at a doorway. "My waitress goes home after the lunch crowd leaves." The burly man walked over to the cash register, opened it, and began removing the money.

"Sure, I can eat in the bar," Kevin replied, walking to a hall with an orange neon sign overhead that glowed **BAR**. The narrow hallway had knotty pine wood on both walls, and two doors were opposite each other. **Buck's** was on one door and **Doe's** on the other. There was a strong scent of urine as Kevin passed by. The hallway opened up into a smoke-filled, dimly lit room. Two men were playing pool, and a woman was at the bar lighting a cigarette. Kevin got an uneasy feeling.

"We got a great meatloaf sandwich," said the cook, pushing Kevin out of the hallway into the den of desolation.

"On second thought, maybe a cup of coffee to go." Kevin held up the fishing brochure. "And some directions."

The cook, now bartender, walked behind the bar and grabbed a coffee pot; he held it up at eye level. "I'd better make a fresh pot. I think this has been brewing since last night."

"That's okay," said Kevin while nervously moving to the bar. "How about some directions? I can pay you for the information."

"Pay me for directions," laughed the cook

"Where are you headed, cute boy?" asked the woman two barstools over.

"Zigzag, Oregon. I want to check out this fishing spot on the Clackamas River."

The woman stood, leaned over, and snatched the brochure from Kevin's hand. She unfolded it and then laid it out on the bar. "Hey Joe, hadn't you logged up by the Clackamas River?" she yelled.

Joe was leaning across the pool table to take a shot. "Yeah, cut some big yellow bellies up that way a few years ago."

"You cut Ponderosa up that way? I thought Mount Hood had nothing but Doug Fir on it." The other pool player chimed in.

"Wasn't cutting on Mount Hood. Had a contract with the Indians southeast of Mount Hood. I was falling trees on the Warm Springs Reservation." Joe said as he shot a pool ball into the corner pocket.

"Cutting those soft belly pines! That must have been some easy work."

"Sure was. Bid the job on stumpage. Only had to sharpen my chain twice a day."

"You two going to bullshit all day or tell cute boy where Zigzag is?" The woman shouted from her perch at the bar.

There was silence as Joe concentrated on the solid black ball. "Eight ball in the corner." There was a loud *smack*, and the black ball disappeared down the corner pocket. Joe laid his cue stick across the table and headed toward the bar.

"You know how to fly fish?" Joe asked while examining the brochure.

"I've caught some trophy-sized Marlin off the coast of Mexico. Fished off Florida and Hawaii." Kevin stopped. *These guys don't want to hear about my fishing trips.*

"Trophy-sized Marlin. Did you bait your hook, cute boy?" asked the other pool player as he limped up to the bar. The black T-shirt with the gold Harley emblem seemed a plausible explanation for the bum leg.

"No," Kevin replied, feeling pinned in by the two rough biker types.

"The Clackamas, huh? I think you might be too late for the spring Steelhead run." Joe said, examining the brochure. "The town you're looking for is on the Mount Hood Highway. Zigzag is about fifteen miles west of the Summit Ski area on Highway twenty-six." Joe flipped the pamphlet over.

"Thanks," Kevin reached for the brochure.

Joe examined the tape stuck onto the back. "What are you, FBI or something? It looks like you have somebody's fingerprints here."

Kevin snatched the advertisement from between Joe's fingers. "It's a long story."

Joe clamped onto the thick paper, not letting Kevin pull it away. "You in a big hurry?" Joe asked. "We got plenty of time to listen to your long story."

"I'm not in any hurry." Kevin paused. "I'm just headed north for a few days. Trying to clear my head and understand why God lets children die."

Silence filled the room. "Well, why don't you play me a game of pool first? That should help clear your head," Joe pointed toward the pool table. "Since you're not in a big hurry and all."

A smoldering Marlboro in a butt-filled ashtray mixed into the stale bar air. Kevin was having difficulty breathing the thick smoke. Joe had the build of a linebacker with cuts all over the back of his hands and knuckles. *I bet those cuts are from bare-knuckle barroom fights.* Kevin scanned the room for an exit. The first thing he learned in martial arts class was to avoid conflicts.

"Go ahead, play Joe for a beer while I brew fresh coffee," said the cook or bartender from behind the bar.

"That's okay. Preppy guys probably don't shoot pool," Joe said while shoving the brochure back at Kevin.

"Sure, I'll play you a game," Kevin replied, not one to turn down a challenge. He walked directly to the table and pulled the ball rack from under the green felt top. "Let's play for fifty dollars." Kevin's grandfather had taught him how to shoot snooker and that the best way to start any game was with an intimidating bluff.

Joe watched Kevin skillfully rack the balls. "I don't have fifty dollars. I'll play you for ten bucks and a beer."

"Then it's a bet. We'll play stars and stripes and call the eight-ball pocket." Kevin stated with confidence. "Should we lag for the break?"

"No, you go ahead," Joe said as he chalked his personal cue stick.

Kevin broke open the rack, and two solid balls fell. "Looks like I'm the small ones," Kevin said as he walked to the far side of the pool table, took aim, and cut the five-ball into the side pocket. Kevin missed the next shot but left the cue ball, so Joe didn't have a good shot. The game changed sides only twice before Kevin called the eight ball in the side pocket, winning the game.

"You're a pretty good shot," said Joe, pulling a five plus three singles from the chest pocket of his greasy overalls. "Hey Randy, you got two bucks?"

"Sure," Randy's wallet had a chrome chain hooked to it; he unzipped it and handed Joe two dollars.

Joe handed the wager to Kevin. "Where'd you learn to shoot pool?"

"My Grandfather took a snooker table in on trade for a trailer many years ago. When I'd go down to the shop on the weekends, I'd play. Did you know snooker was established in India in eighteen seventy-five?"

"Snooker, huh? That's harder than pool, isn't it?" Randy asked.

"Kind of," replied Kevin. "The pockets are a little smaller. There are more balls, and you learn not to leave a shot for your opponent."

"No, kidding. You didn't leave me any ducks." Joe motioned at the green felt top.

"You want to play again? It's been years since I played." Kevin asked while applying chalk to the cue.

"Sure, but it'll have to be for nothing. You cleaned me out," Joe replied. "What I really should say is the Spotted Owl has cleaned me out." Joe pointed at a stuffed Owl with a noose around its neck hanging from a wooden beam.

"What's that all about?" Kevin asked. "There was a protest by Lake Shasta about birds and logging old trees."

"It's a long story. It don't affect you college type." Joe started pushing the pool balls to the end of the table.

"How about if I buy you a beer?" Kevin offered.

"Yeah, sure," Joe replied halfheartedly. "But I already owe you one."

"Bartender, sir, could we get a couple of beers?" Kevin hollered through the smoke from the far end of the pool table.

"His name is Lard-ass," offered Joe as he racked the pool balls.

"Hey, lard…" Kevin paused. "Mr. Bartender, cook or sir, I'll take one of those meatloaf sandwiches you told me about."

"His name is Lard-ass," Randy chimed in, "he doesn't like being called sir."

Everyone laughed except the lone woman in the bar. She loved her dad and didn't think the nickname was funny. She had the tri-fold brochure opened up and face down on the bar. She was jotting down words from a mother's heart in a blank area.

As you spoke about Benny. The boy you knew only a few days ago is also my story. I had a child whom I only got to know for a couple of days. Sadly, Cynthia never left the hospital.

My heart was hardened until I put her into God's hands. I pray that you will ask the Lord for strength to understand His ways—not ours. You and Benny are on my prayer list. Peggy

Eventually, she refolded the brochure, sipped her diet pop, walked behind the counter, and hugged the burly cook. "I need to get milk before I pick up Sammy. Do you need anything, Pop?"

The burly cook hugged her back. "Love you. Let your Mom know that I might be late tonight."

That's why I saw two child seats in the old Buick parked out front. She only mentioned Sammy to her dad. God— why do you let children die?

Kevin won the next three games, washed the meatloaf sandwich down with cold beers, and learned about the Spotted Owl and old-growth timber. He bought rounds for Randy and Joe. Sharing life's trials and tribulations can only go back in time. Kevin even shared a story about Grampa Trask and the swimming pool incident; oddly, he could now chuckle about it.

When Randy joined in playing pool, the game of Stars and Stripes turned to Cut-Throat. Taking shots of whiskey wasn't planned—nor was robbing a stranger.

In the sixth game, Joe sank one ball on the break, then knocked down three in a row. "I'm quitting. I can't afford to lose money I don't have." Joe broke down his cue stick, gripping the heavy butt end in his left hand.

"Good shooting, you guys. But… But…" Kevin stumbled around the table. "I'll bet… the tab… Ah, that I can run the one through five balls," Kevin slurred with alcohol-induced confidence.

"I'm broke… Maybe Randy will take you up on the bet?" Joe nodded at Randy.

Randy had been leaning against the wall, sipping his drink, watching without saying anything. He looked over the lay of the low-numbered balls. "I'll take you up on the bet."

"Good, Ah. I haven't shot a jumper in years," Kevin said in an annoying cocky tone.

Randy looked closely at the thirteen ball. It was blocking every low-numbered ball. "You can't use the thirteen ball to make a combination shot."

"I won't. The bet is that I can run the one through five balls."

"Okay. I bet twenty bucks you can't do it." Randy moved back to his position against the wall.

Kevin took a long, deep breath of musty tavern air. He chalked the cue, walked up to the table, and drew almost straight down on the solid white ball. The cue ball jumped over the thirteen, headed toward the corner, and tapped in the five ball. *Smack,* then c*lunk,* got heard four more times as Kevin picked off the remaining low balls.

"Shit," Randy mumbled while pulling on the chrome wallet chain.

"Ah, a… Nice shooting, preppy college boy," Joe slurred and downed a shot of Jack Daniels.

Randy threw two tens on the green felt, "There's your money!"

"I need to get a large coffee before I head north." Kevin pulled out a money clip, braced himself against the bar, then pulled off a fifty. The beer and whiskey wanted out—immediately. "I need to take a leak. If that's not enough, take what you need." Kevin left his money on the counter.

He weaved toward the hallway and then used his hands to steady on the knotty pine passage to a spring-loaded door. The bathroom door slapped shut, and foul air from seldom-flushed urinals seeped into his nostrils. The pungent odor was like a first-aid kit's antiseptic smell, snapping Kevin halfway back to common sense. *For sure, I can't forget to set the cruise control. I don't want to get pulled over.* He pushed, yet the door didn't budge. It took a while before he figured out the spring door needed to be pulled, not pushed.

"This way, cute boy," Joe said from the dining room end of the hallway.

"Ah… okay." Kevin put his hands against both walls to steady himself.

"You might not want to hit the road without this," Randy said, holding up the fishing brochure from the bar side of the hallway.

His head spun when he looked back, forward, and back again.

"Did you get the brakes zerts checked yet?" Randy asked. "You wrote it down on the back next to the fingerprints. Peggy also wrote you a message here on the back."

"What?" Kevin struggled to put some order to everything that had happened since dawn broke. The spinning mush between his ears accelerated.

"You misspelled brake zerks. Brake bleeding ports and not called jerks. They're zerks, after Oscar Zerk, who owns the patent," Randy said with mechanical clout.

Joe put his hands on Kevin's shoulder and guided him through the darkened restaurant. Randy hurried across the room and held open the door. The trio stood in the gravel parking lot holding each other up, acting stupid and laughing like three high school boys at a keg party after a football game. The mercury-vapor parking lot light hummed while a herd of moths bombarded it. The cold, clear night air had somewhat of a sobering effect on their foolishness.

The burly owner/bartender/cook flipped the red-and-black door sign around to **CLOSED.** He locked up**,** gave the three a lengthy, solid look, then walked to the back of the pickup truck and lowered the tailgate. "You two knuckle-heads are riding back here! Kevin can ride up front, over to the motel." They laughed and yipped coyote calls toward a blue moon.

Kevin staggered to the back of the tailgate and squeezed between Joe and Randy. He tilted his head toward the billions of stars, wanting to understand God's way—the pride was too overbearing to ask for help.

Chap 8—————Deathwish

Face-down on over-bleached sheets, Kevin could barely lift or turn his pounding head. It took him a while to focus on his brown leather wallet and gold watch on the nightstand. Sunlight was peeking in between the pulled drapes. He stepped on one of his shoes, canted into a small table, and rushed to the bathroom to pee.

The foul dryness in his mouth hinted at garlic, catsup, and zesty ground beef. He pulled the plastic wrap off a glass at the sink, filled it with water, and gulped. *Where are my car keys?* Kevin glanced around the dim motel room. *Let's see, I stopped at a restaurant… I went into the back, drank whiskey, and shot pool. How'd I end up here?*

The drawcord for the drapes was frayed and hard to pull. Sunlight blasted into Kevin's throbbing head and lit up the room! He looked to the side at the red digital clock display. It read: **10:32 am**. Last night, began to come together. He looked out the window—the concept SL600 was nowhere to be seen. He yanked, opened the metal door, and headed for the office. Kevin steadied himself before he pushed open the glass door.

A gray-haired man wearing too much 'Old Spice' aftershave stood behind the counter. "Can I help you, young man?"

"I just came from that room over there," Kevin pointed out through the glass door.

"Yes, I know Mr. Kevin Trask. Big Ed checked you in last night. Sounds like you and the boys shot pool and drank too much whiskey."

"Do you mean Randy and Joe?" Kevin asked, rewinding the past twelve hours.

"Yeah, those two, who think they're the outlaw bikers of Myrtle Creek, riding Harleys and all. But really, they're just two candy-ass kids," replied the old man.

"I think they rode over here in the back of a truck, not on those big motorcycles?" Kevin shook his head. It felt like mush.

The well-seasoned motel manager pulled a registration card from an accordion file holder. "The room is sixty-two dollars plus tax."

"I need to go get my money."

"You do that, Mr. Trask." The old veteran reached for the phone. "Dickhead wanted me to call his shop after you woke up."

Kevin left the office, walked across the parking lot, and opened the motel room door. *Oops, my stashed cash is in the glove box.* He looked back over his shoulder, but his car was gone. *I don't recall filling in the registration card. I paid the bar tab and… I can't remember much after that.*

He returned to the office with only his wallet in hand. "Can I put the room on a credit card?"

"Sure," the old man replied, immediately starting with the third degree. "Is that big concrete pool and side tunnel to the Long Beach harbor still there?"

"What?" Kevin asked as he opened his wallet.

"I lost a Filipino boy in the underwater tunnel six weeks after the attack on Pearl Harbor." A tear rolled down the World War Two veteran's face and splat on the registration paperwork.

"Are you talking about the cesspool pit at the far end of the Trask manufacturing plant?" Kevin asked in total confusion.

"I'm talking about the thirty-foot concrete rings with the underwater side tunnel that runs into the harbor under Navy Way Road. That's what I'm talking about, Mr. Trask."

"You mean the big open concrete cesspool rings that the Navy installed years and years ago?"

"It wasn't all that many years," the old Navy man quipped. "Please don't call that testing pit a cesspool. A young Filipino boy testing my re-breathers vanished from the side tunnel out to the harbor."

"That saltwater tide fluctuating hole was there before my grandfather bought the old Navy building. That was a long time ago."

"That's the problem with you young folk. Anything over a few years old gets tossed to the side like it is ancient history."

"A gas station near Roseburg would only take cash." Kevin changed the subject.

"I know that Texaco station you are talking about. They're old school." The seasoned desk clerk looked at the gold credit card. "This is a corporate account. I'll discount the room if you're on business in Oregon."

"I'm on vacation. Just charge me the regular rate," Kevin replied as he walked to the glass door and scanned the parking lot.

The sound of the antique credit card machine roller passing over the card was something Kevin had never heard or seen.

"If you're wondering about your car, Joe said he'd have it here by noon."

"I'm glad someone took my keys last night."

"Big Ed looks out after his patrons. He had to drive those two dickheads home last night, too."

"Well, I owe Big Ed for looking after me." Kevin walked back to the counter and signed the receipt. "Can I go take a shower before I check out?"

"No problem. Check out, ain't till noon." The old man handed the credit card back.

About halfway across the parking lot, Kevin heard tires screeching and a horn blasting. He jumped as high as he did during any basketball game and then started to run toward the protection of the motel walkway. The car followed with the horn still blasting. Kevin took cover behind a timber post holding up the motel's roof.

Joe parked and got out of the SL600, bent over laughing. It took a few seconds before he asked, "How'd that blasting horn make your throbbing head feel?"

From behind the support timber, Kevin pointed at the office. "That old man is right. You are a dick."

Joe had his hands on his knees, trying to catch his breath. "You run like a little sissy girl."

"What the hell are you thinking?" Kevin screamed.

"I thought I'd check the zerks," Joe chided.

Kevin couldn't hold his composure, "It's your fault my head hurts. I've never done straight shots of whiskey like that."

Joe walked over and stood under the covered motel walkway, holding out the car keys. "Good thing I checked your brakes. One of the brake bleeder screws was loose. They are not zerk or jerk fittings but look the same."

"What?" Kevin replied while rubbing his forehead.

"You wrote a note to 'brake check jerks' on the back of the fishing brochure. When I was moving your car from the bar over here this morning, I felt the mushy brakes. So, I took your sweet ride to my shop."

"What did you find?"

"I found one front brake bleeding screw loose. Very, very dangerous. The front brake fluid reservoir was empty."

"How would that happen?" Kevin quit massaging his forehead.

"Prototype cars are not built on an assembly line. Probably just an oversight."

"That makes sense." Kevin paused and thought about Benny leaving the phone message with Condi about the brakes. "I'm lucky

you saw the note and that you know the difference between a jerk, zerk, or brake fitting."

"Well, I wasn't that lucky," Joe swallowed and then confessed. "I accidentally got brake fluid on the leather steering wheel and a few other places. When I was bleeding the brakes, fluid got on my fingers and got transferred to the leather steering wheel and…"

"Don't worry about it. You probably prevented a serious accident."

"No, let me show you." Joe limped back and opened the car door.

Kevin followed. Sure enough, the leather steering wheel had an oily handprint. "Hey, it's no big deal. I don't even like the car. How much do I owe you?"

"How about I only charge you for an hour? And we'll call it even."

"What is your hourly rate, and how long did it take?"

"I charge twenty dollars an hour," Joe sheepishly answered. "It took about two hours and over a quart of brake fluid."

Kevin opened his wallet and held out three twenties. "Will this cover the two hours and the brake fluid?"

Joe peeled off one bill and handed it back. "Forty is more than enough."

"Keep it." Kevin insisted. "You probably saved my life."

"Thanks, it will help with the slowdown of logging trucks needing repairs." Joe shoved the money into the button pocket of his overalls.

"I need to take a shower. I smell like an ashtray," Kevin said, looking toward the motel room. "Afterward, I can drive you back to your shop."

"That would be great. I'll shoot the shit with the old fart in the office. Come get me when you're done." Joe grabbed his cane and headed toward the office.

Kevin let the hot water run over his head in the tiny fiberglass stall till it turned cold. Dripping wet, he used his index finger to clean his teeth and wash away the beer breath. His clothes still smelled like cigarettes. He pulled the motel room door closed and walked across the parking lot.

Joe came out of a small side room with two white Styrofoam cups of hot coffee in hand. "Old Fart made us some fresh coffee." Joe handed one of the cups to Kevin. "You ready? I need to get back to my shop."

"See you later," rang out a frail voice from the side room.

"Okay, thanks for the coffee!"

The automatic cup holder popped out from the dashboard. Kevin placed the Styrofoam cup in the holder and then moved the

driver's seat. "That motel clerk worked at the old Navy building before my Granddad turned it into a manufacturing plant."

"Old Fart's real name is Nick Icorn." Joe took the last gulp of his coffee and then used a red shop rag to wipe the white cup dry. "I don't want to spill any remains on the leather seats."

"Thanks," Kevin replied. "The brakes feel solid now. You do good work."

"Nick's Navy stories will make the hair on your neck stand up. He invented the re-breather. The Navy Seals still use them."

"He did mention being at our plant around the time of the bombing of Pearl Harbor," Kevin said as he turned right onto the one-way street.

"Careful," Joe instructed. "Take a right at the stop sign. My shop is three blocks down Third Street."

"Wow, the brakes are touchy!" Kevin replied as he slowed for the stop sign.

"Three blocks up on the left." Joe pointed.

It looked like a junkyard of logging trucks, not a custom motorcycle shop. Kevin pulled between two defunct gas pumps; all four tires skidded on the dirt-covered concrete pad.

Joe reached for the door handle. "Listen, what you told us about that little boy, Benny, last night before we started shooting pool. About how the cops found him dead in a repair shed. Don't try to figure it out. It has nothing to do with you. Just leave it in His hands."

"What do you mean?" Kevin asked with a rigorous jolt of reflection.

"Something like that happened to me a few years back." Joe looked forward out the windshield. "This fifteen-year-old boy named Cory shows up on a logging site where I was a foreman. This baby-faced kid begs me for a job. He said his family was having money problems." Joe quit speaking and looked out the passenger window.

Kevin lifted the coffee cup from the holder and patiently waited.

"Anyhow, to make a long story short, on his first day, a choker cable broke. A log got loose and killed Cory." Joe paused.

That's horrible! With his thoughts in rewind, Kevin took a long drink of coffee. "Joe, I don't see the connection between Benny and Cory."

"Well, you said that you only knew Benny for a day or two, and somehow, you knew he was special, and you still feel his presence. That's how Cory has been for me. Cory's death and passing have been such an influence on my life." Joe paused. "I just can't explain it. To this very day, Cory's intersession is always there. He's like my Guardian Angel."

"Oh, my God. Benny left that message for me to get the brake zerks checked."

"Maybe when God calls the young and innocent, he has bigger plans for them?" Joe pondered the question for both of them.

"I don't like talking about the afterlife. It scares me," Kevin replied.

"Fear of the Lord is one of the gifts from the Holy Spirit." Joe opened the door. "Godspeed on your journey, Mr. Trask."

"Thanks, Joe. I'll never forget you and this conversation."

Joe closed the passenger door as he walked toward his shop, making the sign of the cross and then looking upward. *Angel Cory, please join me in prayer for Kevin.*

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South of the capital of Oregon, Kevin turned off at the second Salem exit and headed for a big yellow restaurant sign.

"We only serve breakfast until noon," the blue-haired waiter whispers.

"What day is this?" Kevin asked, reaching for a menu.

"Thursday?" replied the waiter. "Looks like you're on a road trip and have been sleeping in your car."

"It has been a rough week," Kevin replied. "I'll have the BLT and a large orange juice." Kevin put the menu back and headed for the restroom. In the mirror, he agreed. *Passing out in my clothes does make for a road trip look. I'll need new clothes, hiking boots, and a fishing vest.*

After lunch, the underweight trans waiter directed Kevin to the Salem Mall off Interstate 5. The new clothes and fresh underwear were worth the stop-and-shop. A new travel kit, a two-hundred-dollar pair of hiking boots, and a multi-pocketed fishing vest were on the passenger seat. In the trunk were two different-colored insulated hip waders—the salesman informed Kevin that the color was essential to coincide with the river's turbidity for catching Steelhead. It sounded like a fish story, but Kevin opted for the green and brown waders.

Five miles before downtown Portland, Oregon, the mobile phone signal indicator showed 5 bars. The GPS unit displayed: **Take 205 bypass**. Ten miles north on the 205 bypass, he crossed the Clackamas River, and the GPS display changed to: **Take Highway 26 East.** Kevin missed that exit, got off at the next one, and purchased a map at a Texaco service station. He located Powell Boulevard, turned east, and then switched off the GPS unit. *These new mapping units are more distracting than helpful. So is the bag phone.*

Wrong direction anxiety subsided when he saw the green and white highway sign: **Zigzag 32 miles.** *Great, I might get in an evening fishing session.* With brakes he could trust, Kevin set the cruise control to 55 miles per hour. The green signal indicator on the car phone dropped to just one bar on the long downgrade north of Sandy, Oregon.

The Mt. Hood Safety corridor changed to all uphill for 18 miles. The town of Zigzag consisted of a Dairy Queen, a grocery store, a Forest Service office, and a dozen or so small cabins. At the far end of town, Kevin pulled to the side of the road to examine the brochure again. **GET AWAY FROM IT ALL! VISIT ZIGZAG, OREGON. FISH THE SANDY RIVER Fish the Clackamas River.**

He made a U-turn and slowly drove west, retracing his path through the small town. The sun was getting low; his designer sunglasses were at the bottom of Shasta Lake. While squinting, he tried to read the faded blue wood sign on the front of a shake-sided building. There were two logging trucks parked alongside a dilapidated woodshed. He blocked the sun with an open hand to his forehead but could barely make out the lettering on the faded sign: **Clackamas, Sandy, and Deschutes Rivers — Guide Service.**

The wooden porch creaked as Kevin approached the door. The door felt swollen shut or jammed; he bumped it hard with his shoulder. Inside, cowbells hooked to the doorknob rang through the dim room. Kevin slowly entered!

In the back of the store, a glass display case blocked off a hallway leading farther into the building. The wall on the right-hand side had some old fishing gear and Polaroid pictures tacked on a cork bulletin board. The wall on the left-hand side featured snowshoes and skis on display. A day pack and other climbing gear were piled up in the front corner. Kevin walked up to the display case; behind the curved glass were some soccer trophies, several 4-H ribbons, a high school diploma, and three varsity letters for skiing. What caught Kevin's attention was an eight-by-ten photograph of two people standing on the summit of a mountain. Written across the bottom of the photo: **Thanks for taking me to the top of Oregon. Governor Tom McCall**.

"Anyone here?" Kevin yelled out. There was no answer. He moved behind the glass display case and quietly walked into the hallway. Kevin cupped his hand up to his ear to see if he could hear anybody in the back part of the building. The sound of the cowbells ringing from the knob on the entrance door startled Kevin.

"Can I help you?" asked a grungy, plain, tall blond as she came through the door with a handful of mail.

"I hope so," Kevin replied with his face turning red, embarrassed about his snooping position behind the counter and

being caught down the hallway. "I'd like to sign up with one of the fishing guides." Kevin walked back to the rear of the display case.

"Okay," said the lanky woman as she raised one leg and kicked hard just above the doorknob. The hanging cowbells rang out again! "The door kind of sticks."

"Yeah, I noticed when I came in." Kevin moved to the side of the display case.

The tall, braided blond brushed up against him as she passed by. Kevin caught a strong scent of something off her coveralls. "Are you the one I need to talk to about fishing?" Kevin asked, noticing her rough and dirty hands holding the mail.

"Yeah, you talk to me. Hold on a moment." She disappeared down the hallway. Kevin heard, "Mom, here's the mail."

"Any bills?"

"Doesn't look like it. I got to go. We got a customer."

Kevin moved to the front of the display case. *She must be a mechanic or something. That's diesel fuel I smelled.*

Halfway down the hallway, Lily reached under her chin and pulled down the long zipper on blue and white striped coveralls; they dropped to the floor. She stepped out of them and hung them on a deer antler coat rack. Now, in a white cotton sleeveless shirt, a pair of cutoff jeans, and ankle-high work boots. Kevin took note. *She's no college rally type.*

The strip-down was unplanned or intentional, as was Kevin's stare. Lilly never considered herself a tomboy, but the tag came from being a logger's daughter. Often, she didn't wear a bra because she was muscular and lanky. Feeling somewhat violated, she folded her arms across her chest. Yet, Kevin's stare felt different, almost fun. Never had a movie star-looking man gazed at her in this way. Lilly casually unfolded her arms, put her hand on the waistband of her cutoffs, and so slightly pushed out her chest. The tips of her breasts pushed hard against the soft white cotton. She forced a closed-mouth smile, careful not to show her crooked teeth.

Kevin's eyes drifted down toward her flat stomach.

"What are you looking at?" Lilly asked.

"Your hands," Kevin quickly answered. "I respect women who have working hands and do hard jobs."

"Is that some sort of sexual insinuation about hand jobs or something?"

Kevin is baffled by Lilly's response. "Your hands look like some of the women who work on the assembly line in our plant."

Lilly took her hands off her hips. They were rough and grubby, her fingernails dirty. "I'll be right back." She quickly disappeared down the hall to hide her burning red face. *Why did I say that? He*

must think I'm some nasty hick or a foul-mouthed logger's daughter.

Kevin heard the sound of running water and a different voice. "I thought you had a customer?"

A barely audible voice floated down the hallway. "Yeah, I do. Some well-to-do yuppie wants to set up a guide trip," Lilly answered as she scrubbed at her hands and fingernails!

"Did he leave? Why's your face so red?" the other woman asked.

"Not so loud, Mom?" Lilly was splashing water on her face. "I just need to clean off some grease and dirt. I've been working with Dad on that damn logging truck."

"Do you want me to go help that young man?" Mary asked.

"No, I got it covered." Lilly grabbed a hand towel from the oven door handle and strutted down the hall, drying her hands.

Kevin was reviewing a guide package contract that he had found. "Two different contact phone numbers. Are two necessary?"

"They are if you want us to contact you."

"I'd like to fish this evening or tomorrow morning. Can your guide fit me in?" Kevin held the reservation contract up. "I can pay the two-person minimum rate. But it will just be me."

"I'll tell the fish you will pay twice as much for them. The news might get them to head upstream early." Lilly handed Kevin a clipboard with a pencil attached by a string. "Put down a good contact number."

"I'll give you a private business number plus a mobile phone number." Kevin started filling in the form.

"Whatever." Lilly dropped the damp dish towel on the counter and came out from behind the glass display case. "Is that your sports car or a rental?"

"It's mine," replied Kevin as he filled in the Trask Corporate office address in Long Beach, California.

"It must be expensive."

"Yeah, I guess so... The GPS sucks," answered Kevin while filling in more lines of information.

Lilly thought about asking what a GPS was, but didn't want to appear ignorant. "So, you have one of those car phones?"

"Yeah, it's a piece of crap too." Kevin looked up from the clipboard. "Why is there no box to check for the summer Steelhead season?"

"Steelhead that run in the summer are already in the rivers east of the Mountains." Lilly moved away from the door. "Too late to let them know that you'll pay twice."

"Head upstream? Summer run? What are you talking about?" Kevin asked, looking up from the clipboard.

"Steelhead, you know they swim upstream to spawn in the Spring? When they do, that's called a run. We had a good winter run on the Clackamas River. But that ended in May."

"What!" Kevin was the one feeling ignorant now. "Are you telling me there's no fishing?"

"No. I'm telling you that the Steelhead are through running in the Sandy River." Lilly replied firmly and confidently, now that she was in her outdoor element.

"You mean to tell me I just drove across Oregon to find out there's no fishing?" Kevin quipped while dropping the stringed pencil on the clipboard. "Your brochure says nothing about fishing only in the Spring."

"Are you talking about this?" Lilly pointed at a brochure on the bulletin board next to Polaroid pictures of fishermen holding up their trophy-sized fish. "Look here," she said, and unpinned the advertisement from the bulletin board. "Right here, it says call ahead to get the latest fishing report."

"I bet that small print makes many of your customers mad."

"Not really. You're the first person who has shown up to fish for Spring Steelhead in the summer." Lilly smiled, displaying her crooked buck teeth. "I'm sorry you drove across Oregon. You must be a Californian?"

"What are you implying? That Californians are stupid!"

"No, but they like fancy cars like yours. We drive four-wheel drives up here."

Kevin shook his head. "Never mind about fishing."

"I'm sorry about you not reading the fine print." Lilly somewhat empathized.

"It's not your fault. I was getting gas and needed to write on the back of the brochure."

"Okay, there is lake fishing this time of year. I could point out a couple of good spots for you."

"That might be good," Kevin replied with a downbeat tone. "No, forget it. I tried catching fish on Lake Shasta last week but didn't even get a bite." Kevin paused. "I've caught fish in Hawaii, Florida, off the coast of Mexico, and other places."

"Good for you, Mr. Trask." Lilly read 'Trask' off the guide service contract.

"I go by Kevin."

"Well, Kevin." Lilly's light brown eyes glanced up from the clipboard. "You'd probably do okay in one of the lakes around here. The Rainbow Trout have been hitting on worms. Unless you want to try a nymph."

"A nymph! I'm not even going there after my working hands' statement." Kevin replied, puzzled and with caution. "Are you talking about the women in classical mythology represented as

beautiful maidens dwelling in the mountains, forests, trees, and waters?"

Lilly laughed. "The nymphs I'm talking about are fishing flies." She pointed through the glass at some hooks with different-colored threads and feathers. "Look down here at these hand-tied nymphs."

"Oh, I get it." Kevin felt his face getting red. "They're artificial bugs."

"You got it." Lilly pointed at a very tiny hook tied with a yellow and green yarn. "Rainbow Trout always hit hard on that wet fly."

"I'll buy it and whatever else the guide recommends."

"Those flies are not for sale. My brother tied them."

"Oh," Kevin replied, looking more closely at different display case items. "Is that your brother standing on top of a mountain?" Kevin pointed at a photo. "And those must be all his trophies and awards."

"Yes, that's his stuff," Lilly replied almost inaudibly.

Kevin noticed the **Items Not for Sale** folded tent card in the corner and sensed the strain on Lilly. "Can I hire your guide to take me fly fishing?"

Lilly straightened up. "A guide to go fish in a lake? I never had anyone ask that before." She moved to the side of the display case.

"You said you knew where fish are and that they like wet nymphs." Kevin pointed through the glass. "That looks like that.".

"Nobody hires a guide to lake fish."

"Well, I could use some pointers. I tried fishing at Lake Shasta three days in a row with Red Hot eggs…" Kevin's thoughts turned to Benny.

"How'd you do? I hear the bass put up a pretty damn good fight in that reservoir." "A… I only fished for a few hours, and then a lot happened. I've never really lake-fished before. Just been on charters."

"Lake fishing is okay, but there's nothing better than catching a wild Steelhead in a river." Lilly offered a smile and sealed her lips to hide crooked teeth.

Kevin started thinking about Benny at Lake Shasta. *I wonder what day they will have the funeral? I should send flowers or something. It's not probable that a boy with cancer would be sniffing intoxicants. Unless…*

"Mr. Trask, if you would like, I have some flies of my own that I will give to you. Bring in your gear, and I'll rig you up."

"I left all my gear on a houseboat, down at Shasta Lake… I don't want to go to a lake for a while. I'll come back in the fall to fish a river."

"Well, then, make sure you leave two contact numbers. When the fall Steelhead run starts, I'll call you." Lilly noticed how distant Kevin had become.

Kevin opened his wallet and pulled out a business card. He wrote his mobile number on the back. "You can call either number." Kevin flashed back to Benny, who was found with one of the Trask cards.

Lilly put it under the clip on the clipboard. "I'll call when the fall run starts. Fishing is best after a heavy rain."

"Is there anything else to do around here?"

"You can go hiking or try the toboggan run at Ski-Bowl. The drive around the east side of Mt. Hood to Hood River, then down the Columbia River gorge, is spectacular."

"Mt. Hood, don't people climb that mountain this time of year?"

"Some people do," Lilly replied in a muted voice.

"I think I'll do that. I see you got some gear over there." Kevin pointed toward a corner with boxes of climbing gear.

"We're not in the climbing business any longer," Lilly snapped firmly. "The liability is too high."

"You have some crampons and two ice axes over there." Kevin motioned with his head. "I've climbed before!"

"That equipment is not for rent. I told you, we are out of the climbing business!"

"I'll sign a disclaimer," Kevin offered. "I'll buy the crampons and one of the ice axes. I've heard that Mt. Hood is a cakewalk."

"Cakewalk! You don't have a clue! Only a dumbass climbs solo."

"I took a climbing course at college. We climbed Mt. Rainier. I've climbed Half Dome at least three times and Longs Peak in the Rocky Mountains. Mt. Hood is the most climbed peak in North America…" Kevin stopped.

Lilly was looking back over her shoulder. "Mom, you should have stayed in the kitchen. I'm closing up."

"I wanted to see who caused you to scrub your hands like you had been cleaning fish," Mary replied, giving Kevin the once-over.

Kevin returned, up and down, wondering why a woman no older than his mother needed a walker. "Clean hands, keep the germs away," Kevin offered off the cuff.

"We don't rent climbing equipment any longer!" Lilly's face was turning red, hoping her mom hadn't heard her crude hand-job outburst earlier to Kevin.

"Don't be fooled, young man. Mt. Hood is more than a cakewalk!" Mary said firmly.

"I'll be right back." Kevin pulled hard on the stuck door and jumped down two wooden stairs to the parking lot. He opened the glove box and pushed the yellow speeding ticket to the side. His stash of money was gone!

Lilly was careful not to speak too loudly. "Mom, please don't embarrass me."

"So that is what a yuppie-college-type looks like?" "He's as handsome as your father was at that age."

Kevin meandered up the two stairs onto the wooden plank porch and paused. *I used a credit card when I bought clothes and gear in Salem. Before that, I gave cash from my stash to Joe for bleeding the brakes, and…* Out of nowhere, *a* large black Labrador took advantage of the open door and bolted around the display case down the hallway into the kitchen.

Mary followed with her walker as fast as she could. "Outside _ucker," were the words Kevin heard from the porch.

"What," blurted Kevin, confused and shocked to hear the F-bomb from a woman as old as his own Mom.

"You left the door wide open," Lilly explained.

"Get out _ucker!" came from the hallway again.

"Should I leave?" Kevin awkwardly asked as the big black lab came from around the display case, sniffed Kevin, then meandered out the door.

"Good boy, Tucker." Lilly walked across the shop and shut the door.

Dazed, Kevin said, "I thought your mom was yelling at me to leave."

Lilly smiled, "She was yelling at Tucker. My brother named him Tucker, hoping it would confuse people."

"Well, it worked," Kevin replied, noticing Lilly's crooked teeth.

"Tucker will eat anything that's left out in the kitchen."

"He must go a hundred pounds or so." Kevin was looking through the glass in the door. Tucker was lifting his leg to pee on one of the magnesium wheels.

"No, only eighty-five pounds." Lilly yanked the door open. "Tucker, don't do that!" She could smell Kevin's cologne and quickly stepped back. She'd been working all day and had awful body odor.

"I'll give you two hundred dollars for an ice ax and two hundred dollars for those used crampons. That way, your shop will not be liable if I buy the stuff."

"Do you have gloves and a good parka?" Lilly moved back to keep her distance. "It can be cold and windy above the timberline."

"I just bought a bunch of new stuff this morning. I purchased new boots and a fishing vest, but no gloves or cold-weather stuff."

Lily took a red hooded down parka off a deer antler rack. "Try this on," she said, handing the coat over the top of the display case while wishing that she had put on deodorant.

Kevin pulled on the jacket. "This fits," he affirmed while pulling on the hood.

"There should be gloves in one of the pockets."

Kevin felt inside the different pockets and found a compass, whistle, matches, and gloves. "What do I owe you for all this extra stuff?"

"Nothing, just bring the jacket back. Four hundred for the climbing equipment is more than enough." Lilly would not have done the deal if not for her mom's prescription that needed to be filled. Also, unemployment checks would no longer be available.

"One problem. I'll have to have the Trask head secretary wire the money to you."

Lilly looked deep into Kevin's hazel eyes with genuine concern. Mystically, they were the same color as Billy's. "Mr. Trask, this do-or-die hook you got in your gut to go up on a seemingly simple mountain can claim even the most experienced climber."

Kevin sensed something more than Lilly's warning. He grabbed the ice ax and crampons before she could undo their deal.

Chap 9—————Shame on you

It was evening, and the sun had yet to set when Kevin pulled into the parking lot of Timberline Lodge. It was still too soon to start for the summit. His plan to get a room for a few hours of sleep was as poorly thought out as the Steelhead fishing trip to the north side of Oregon. Getting a room without a reservation at a world-renowned resort during peak season was impossible, no matter how much money was offered. Sleeping in the car was the only option.

A diehard snowboarder working in the deli filled Kevin in on the location of the climbing register and the typical summit start time. The hyperactive waiter drew two different routes on napkins. At the same time, Kevin packed high-carbohydrate snacks and two bottles of water into the pockets of the borrowed red climbing parka.

Over a massive fireplace, Kevin read a plaque about how the historic lodge was built in 1937 without a nail to keep men busy during the Great Depression. Each log got cut and hand-fitted with only hand tools, and the wage was one dollar a day. Kevin walked away, wondering if the Trask union employees' demands were for a fair wage.

Out in the parking lot, he examined both napkins. The south face was the easy route and required no ropes or much experience. That would be the route he would take to the summit. Although it was June, it was unseasonably cold. The fifty-plus-year lodge sat at the 6000-foot level, where trees quit growing—hence the name Timberline Lodge. According to the waiter, Thursday after midnight was a good day to climb because weekends could easily see over 200 hikers heading to the top of Mt. Hood.

In the Mercedes, Kevin pulled the parka hood down over his forehead and pulled the drawstring to block the daylight. With the seat reclined, he peeked through the small opening. The white snow-covered peak contrasted against the deep blue sky. *Finally,*

I will accomplish something all on my own. Fate brought me to this mountain, and an easy solo ascent on the summer equinox will be all for myself.

A sound sleep during the longest day of light proved unproductive. Kevin's mind reflected on Benny's fate, then flipped to Richard Johnson, then flipped to going to work at the family business. Tina's sullied sexuality flashed in and out and mixed with the weekend trips his grandfather took him on at age fourteen. Two hours after sunset, his overtaxed brain gave way to the rest he needed.

Kevin was awakened by the sound of car doors and trunks opening and slamming shut. About a dozen climbers were already on the trail west of Timberline Lodge under the Magic Mile ski lift. The darkness and cold, damp air didn't help a cramped back and limbs. He slowly meandered across the parking lot and waited behind three climbers signing in at the register shack. **June 21, 1:20 am** was what Kevin filled in next to his name. He switched on a flashlight and waited for the two women ahead to round the corner of the Lodge. Before they got out of sight, a group of five jogged past. *Forget about any solitude on this mountain. I might as well take my time. I won't be the first to summit today. At least I was right to tell that flower-named girl that this mountain is known as a cakewalk.*

After four hours of a steady incline, Kevin got passed by at least thirty climbers. The new boots needed breaking in. The grueling incline was like running the dreaded bleachers at basketball practice. The beams from headlamps and flashlights looked like bouncing dots ahead. A few spots of light were already on Hogsback, the forty-five-degree chute to the summit. There was solitude in taking up the rear; being first, number one, or even an all-star basketball player wasn't part of his DNA—he'd yet to find his place even after twenty-two years of privilege.

The heavy yellow sulfur fumes were rolling down the mountain, polluting the crisp mountain air. Kevin remembered what the deli clerk warned him about. *The sulfur fumes make many people sick, and they turn back there. Stay to the east of Crater Rock. After you get past the sulfur fields, you will need your ice ax and crampons. The Hogsback route will turn to almost forty-five degrees. Be careful of falling rocks as the rising sun loosens up the snow.*

Kevin passed by the belching sulfur fumaroles and stopped to rest on a bathtub-sized boulder. The sulfur fumes smelled like a dozen road flares burning. At ten thousand feet, the air lacked oxygen. The rising sun cast long shadows to the west. Kevin emptied one of the bottles of water, trying to wash the rotten egg sulfur taste from his throat. Three climbers passed by with scarves

across their mouths; they didn't say a word. A few minutes later, another group of four quickly passed without acknowledgment.

Next, a man and a decorous woman stopped. "You will be completely out of the sulfur fumes about two hundred yards ahead." The man firmly warned.

"You will get ill if you stay here too long." The woman, with a sheer veil covering her face, said more lovingly. Oddly, the veil was so sheer it couldn't block sulfur fumes. It didn't even block her radiant beauty.

"Thanks," replied Kevin. "I'm glad to know cleaner air lies ahead."

"Follow us!" The young man extended a hand.

Kevin put out his hand and was glad to be helped to his feet. He followed the experienced climbers. Sure enough, the grunge in his throat slowly cleared. Finally, Kevin drew in some clean, thin mountain air. He knew about altitude sickness from earlier climbs, but had never been through a sulfur field. A flat top boulder ten feet off the trail would become Kevin's second refuge, where he could check his gear and loosen the new boots.

"Over there, about a hundred yards, is Hogsback. Stay in the deep cutout through the Pearly Gates to the summit." The young man pointed with his ice ax.

It took a few minutes for Kevin to stand and heed the couple's wisdom. He finally caught up with them. "Thanks for getting me away from the crater area. That sulfur is bad stuff. The air is much better here." Kevin replied between rapid, short breaths.

"If you don't reach the summit, there is always another day. No matter how much your pride nags at you, it's not do-or-die. Don't let a prideful conquest conquer you," the stately woman cautioned.

"Thanks for the advice," Kevin replied as he leaned against a large boulder.

"As my mother warned, don't risk your life trying to prove something. Conquer pride, not a pile of rocks." The son turned and followed his mother.

"Thanks, you two," Kevin called out, filling his lungs with cool air.

Thank God those two came along at the right time. Kevin watched Mother and Son disappear up the trail. Gargling with more water helped get the foul sulfur taste out of his mouth and raw throat. Two more climbers passed before Kevin's skull quit pounding. After twenty minutes, he acclimated to the ten-thousand-foot altitude and readied to move on. One of the spikes on a crampon had worn a hole in the red loaner pack.

The last hundred yards to the base of Hogsback required several hands-on-knees stops to suck in the thin air. Kevin

rationalized his slow pace. *Sleeping in the car was not a good way to start this climb, especially after drinking and shooting pool the day before. The three days on Lake Shasta were physically and mentally draining.*

Kevin moved off the trail to a staging cutout where climbers geared up. He ate a protein bar and finished the bottle of water. Seven professional climbers were already coming down; their helmets had summit decals from various mountains. Kevin got out of the way to let three more groups descend through the waist-deep chute. The sun felt good as it penetrated the red coat. *Now it's my time. It looks like I got Mount Hood to myself.* Kevin looked up the eight-hundred-foot snow cutout to the summit. The sun was passing between two monolithic rocks at the top of the rut, known as the Pearly Gates.

He felt a wetness in his sock as he lashed on the spiked crampon. It was painful removing the left boot. Pushing down his sock, he released a water blister on the back of his heel. *Damn it! These new boots needed breaking in. Damn it, I feel a blister on my other foot too.*

Finally, where the cutout ice narrowed even more, Kevin had to anchor with his ice ax and move out of the chute to let three roped-up guides pass. "The snowpack is getting dangerously soft. Do you want to rope in with us? We will descend any stragglers by the Wy' East route."

"No, I'm turning back." The decorous woman's Do-or-Die warning flipped over and over in Kevin's oxygen-starved brain. They were words directed at both pride and shame.

"You're not going to try to summit today, are you?" asked the last roped-up climber.

"No, I'm turning back after I take a few photos." Kevin didn't even have a camera. After they were a distance away, he carefully moved back into the snow ditch. The crampon didn't get a solid bite when he set the toe spike. He swung the ice ax overhead; the ten-inch steel pick went halfway into the corn snow. He slipped about a yard before the crampons caught hold. "This is not good," Kevin mumbled to himself.

Cautiously, he swung the ice ax into the shaded side of the ditch sidewall and reset the left crampon toe spike. It took forty minutes to work himself down Hogsback.

Kevin noticed climbers descending the Wy'East route about a half mile to the east. *I'll go up that route. It's all in the shade.* It took about forty-five minutes for Kevin to backtrack to the Y on the trail above Crater Rock. He made it a hundred yards up the Wy'East route without slipping. The sun was overhead, past noon. The shade had re-hardened the slush, and the wind had cooled off the mountain. Kevin welcomed the solitude. The long days of June left

the window for an evening accent open. He had climbed mountains more complex and even hunkered down through an overnight snowstorm on Mt. Rainier. Pride convinced Kevin that he could do this by himself. Now was the time slot when descenders were off the mountain, and ascenders had not started yet.

The wind and shade lowered the chill factor by more than twenty degrees. Kevin decided to snap on the lightweight snow pants he had seen in the pack. A flat spot ahead appeared to be a secure location. He worked himself onto the ledge—it was like being on the observation deck of the Chicago Sears Tower. He could see far into Eastern Oregon. To the south, he could see down the Cascade Mountain range to Mount Jefferson. Four thousand feet below, Timberline Lodge looked like the Lincoln Log kit he had assembled with his granddad as a yearning boy. Kevin's legs dangled over the edge; the heel of his left boot struck the face of the rock ledge. With his pack off, there was more room to lean against the rock wall. He removed the left crampon and boot; pain shot up the back of his leg to the small of his back. Blood covered the entire heel of the white sock! *Thank God someone is looking out for me. I saw extra hiking socks in the pack.*

As he dug in the day pack, he accidentally pushed a crampon over the ledge! Kevin watched as the crampon bounced and flipped end over end. The metal spikes twinkled in the sun's rays, which helped to track its flight. It halted when it wedged into a crevice between two truck-sized monoliths. One more bounce and the crampon would have been inside the Mt. Hood crater.

Kevin's heart raced—the left boot teetered on the edge. The shoestrings were flopping in the wind; his hand shook. Kevin carefully leaned forward and cautiously reached for the boot. He snatched the shoestring a millisecond before a strong gust of wind. *That was close! Lose that boot, and I'd be digging in overnight.* Adrenaline and anxiety subdued the pain of the bleeding blister as Kevin methodically worked himself back from the ledge. Pulling on the fresh pair of socks was the least of his problems. The sun was reflecting off the steel spikes. But climbing down to retrieve the crampon without a rope would be dangerous. Kevin leaned back and closed his eyes. *Shame on you for not letting your family know.* This concerning message felt motherly, as though a child had been left behind.

Fifteen minutes trying to pick out a trail down to the twin monoliths was a waste of daylight. The one thing going down was the temperature. Kevin stood and started for the Wy'East trail.

Slowly, the yellow sun turned into an orange ball as it passed through the haze hovering over Portland, Oregon. *You need to get off this mountain*, motherly words again that pushed out the pride Kevin had hoped to satisfy with a solo ascent.

The cold east wind blew the pungent sulfur fumes westward. He made it to the top of the Palmer Glacier, falling only twice. Finally, he could rest and take a break—the parking lot was within a mile*. I need to take off the lone crampon. Between over-tightening the straps and these new boots, my feet are killing me.* He pulled off the pack, dropped it to the ground, and sat on it. His left foot now oozed watery blood over the back of his sock. Kevin carefully pulled off the sock; a big hunk of skin stuck to the fresh sock.

The Palmer Glacier was groomed for year-round skiing and had about three inches of corn snow over ice. The corn snow numbed the raw flesh, and Kevin made the mile trek with only socks on in less than an hour. The ski run ended about a hundred yards from the parking lot and about the same distance from Timberline Lodge. It didn't take long for the sharp lava rocks to cause Kevin's thawing feet to scream, *No way!*

The only thing that grew at the six-thousand-foot elevation was small scrub trees, yet big enough to hide him from view. In the distance, he heard car doors slamming, engines starting, and tires on pavement fading away. Kevin positioned himself to see around the stunted scrub trees. *I'll have to put on the boots to get to my car.*

The SL600 had been sitting in the parking lot for over twenty-four hours and had a ticket under the wiper blade for not having a national parking pass. Kevin had been on the mountain twice the expected time to climb and descend Mt. Hood. He hadn't been in a bed or slept for thirty-five hours. To avoid shame, he sat down. *I'll keep out of sight for a while. I'm feeling as embarrassed as when Grandpa saw me naked, in the pool with Maria. I'll rest until the parking lot clears for the day… I'm getting warmer now… My feet are feeling hot too… I'll use the jacket as a pillow… A short break is all—*

A hundred feet, or a hundred yards, didn't matter—falling to sleep barefoot, wet, and out of sight while the temperature dropped was dangerous.

Kevin felt something pushing at his shoulder, and his tired eyes opened. A dirty hand that smelled of diesel oil extended from a blue-and-white checked flannel shirt. Kevin sat up and rubbed at his windburned forehead. A tall, wiry person said, "You must be the Trask boy?"

"Yeah, I'm… Yes, I… am a Trask," Kevin couldn't even put two words together.

"Lilly said that you came up here. She told me you had a fancy car. I spotted your breath fog from the parking lot."

"An hour? A… I only closed my eyes… for a…"

"It's been more like forty minutes! Good way to die from exposure."

"That wouldn't happen; my car is right down there." Kevin got to his feet and pointed.

"Yeah, right," the smelly, seasoned man replied. "What happened? You twist your ankle?" Kenneth removed his denim jacket, helped Kevin into it, and then handed over his warm gloves. Put these on. You don't want frostbite.

"No, these new boots wore blisters on the back of my feet." Kevin pointed down at the back of the now bloody sock.

"I always break in my boots. Couldn't afford to have new corks that gave me blisters like that."

"Corks! What are Corks?" Kevin asked, trying to get his bearings.

"They're logging boots, and they have spikes on the bottom to walk on logs. They're sort of like Billy's ice spikes. The ones you rented from Lilly."

Kevin extended his hand. "I'm Kevin."

"People, call me Kenneth or Ken. I'm not that particular."

"Glad to meet you, Kenneth." They shook hands.

Ken bent down, grabbed the pack with one hand, and then came up under Kevin's armpit. "Keep your arm over my shoulder. I'll help you off this damn mountain." Ken could feel Kevin's twang from pain with every step. "How much do you weigh?"

"About one hundred seventy-five pounds," Kevin said while gritting his teeth.

"How about I throw you over my shoulder?" Kenneth suggested.

"No, I can make it. But the lava rocks are sharp." Kevin replied.

"Are your boots in the pack?" Kenneth unzipped the pack, pulled out the almost new boots, and tossed them on the ground. "What happened to the other crampon?"

"I lost it," Kevin replied and then recanted. "It's not lost. I didn't have a rope to climb down and get it."

"You know where it is?"

"Yeah, right at the base of Crater Rock." Kevin plopped back down. He needed to get the weight off his bare feet. "Maybe they have an ATV or four-wheeler at the lodge I can rent to get me back to my car?"

"They probably do. But you can't drive something with rubber tires up on this here mountain. Thank the environmentalists for that. They'd let you die here first." Kenneth was now examining Kevin's boot. "You going to want to keep these? Looks like they're expensive."

"No," Kevin replied, then looked directly at the old logger. "I'll be throwing them away."

Kenneth already had a knife out of his pocket. "You sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure," Kevin answered non-argumentatively.

Kenneth used the razor-sharp blade to cut out the heel section of one boot. "Here, try this," Ken handed the boot back to Kevin.

Kevin looked at the big cutout in the back of the boot. Fatigue was taking its toll. "I wish I had thought to do that," Kevin watched Kenneth cut at the other boot.

"Do you have a knife on you?" Kenneth asked.

"No," replied Kevin, dropping his head in shame.

"Well, I guess you weren't prepared to climb a mountain," Kenneth said as he cut at the other boot. "You had no business being up here. You're feeding the deep-down beast."

"I've climbed three other mountains," Kevin replied in a weak, defensive tone.

"All alone!" Kenneth snapped back. "So, you climbed three other mountains. I'm sure those times were with a guide or in a climbing party. Coming up on Mount Hood alone and unprepared makes you stupid and a fool." Kenneth handed the second boot back to Kevin.

Irritation was boiling inside. *This old codger is not my dad or granddad. Who does he think he's scolding?* Too weak to argue, Kevin pulled on the boots and stood. "Thanks, I can make it to my car." It took all his effort to put on the red pack and head for the parking lot. On the third step, he stumbled over an untied bootlace and fell onto his hands and knees.

Kenneth's massive hands gripped Billy's old pack, and he lifted Kevin to his feet. "How many more times will you fall before you admit you need my help?"

"I know I messed up!" Kevin fell again.

Ken picked up and tossed Kevin over his shoulder, like he did with chainsaws for most of his life. Tears began flowing from his deep blue eyes down a life-hardened face. The tears turned the red lava dust into blood-looking droplets. This time, he had the opportunity to warn a pride-filled, do-or-die risk-taker.

Chap 10—————Exposito

Drained by a week of nonstop trials and tribulations, Kevin drifted in and out of consciousness. His head flopped against the cab's back window while heat blasted on his feet. Loud clattering from the worn doors on the four-by-four brought him back to moments of reality. "Where are you taking me?"

"You need rest and some fixing up on those feet. I'm taking you to our cabin down Forest Road Thirty, half a hitch off Highway Twenty-Six."

Kevin was in no shape to argue. His head fell against the work truck's metal doorpost. The next flash of reality was an A-frame cabin, and then I was being helped up squeaky stairs to a loft.

Kenneth helped him into the bottom bunk and threw a sleeping bag over him. The last words Kevin heard were, "There's firewood on the deck if you get cold again." Footsteps faded down squeaky wood stairs, and then a door opened and slammed shut. Next, the sound of a loud diesel motor faded into the distance. A musty, cool air hovered over the bunks up in the loft. Kevin started coughing and then shook uncontrollably. His core body temperature had yet to warm to normal. He pulled the sleeping bag over his head and could feel how damp his clothes were. His teeth began to chatter; he balled up into the fetal position—the shaking intensified. *I need to build a fire to warm up*.

Shivering uncontrollably, Kevin found the firewood on the deck. There were matches on the mantle and dry paper on the hearth. The warmth from the burning paper felt good, but the logs wouldn't catch fire. Kevin wadded up more paper and placed it against the stacked logs. The wood wouldn't burn! The cold chills and shivering

returned after all the paper was gone. *I need to get out of these wet clothes!*

Naked and back in the sleeping bag, the uncontrollable shaking was a dangerous stage of hypothermia. *I can't fall asleep,* was what Kevin had learned in a Roman History class. In ancient Rome, exposito, or exposure, was a practice where infants were abandoned to die due to various reasons like economic hardship, birth defects, or illegitimacy. It was a common method of dealing with unwanted children. The infants would get left out in the cold in a secluded place to die from the elements. This practice was acceptable until the baby turned eight days old.

Kevin's mind drifted to a more pleasant history about how the Jews differed from the Romans. Their faith led them to oppose the practice of Exposito and would often recuse these infants. Next, a glorious mystery of the veiled woman and her son ascending through the pearly gates on Mount Hood filled his head. He didn't remember seeing them descend. Kevin reached out—he so wanted to join them—but was told to go back.

His dream turned to being in a hospital bed and a tall nurse tending to his ravaged feet. The nurse stripped, glared at him contemptuously, rolled him on his side, lifted the sleeping bag, and crawled onto the bed behind him. She moved against his back—they were as close as two spoons lying in a drawer. Her flesh began transferring warmth into his body. Her long arms were rubbing his chest down to his stomach and back. The scent of baby powder lingered under the sleeping bag. He felt a mix of disdain and comfort radiating from the nursemaid's bosom—it was bittersweet.

Suddenly, like the lid of a coffin shutting out even the faintest rays of light, Kevin's altered state lingered in nonsensical words. "*Spoon Tucker spoon."*

The darkness had a smothering, blanketing weight. The sweet baby smell turned into a sour locker room smell. A big black beast pinned Kevin in the bunk. He freed his head from under the sleeping bag, closed his eyes, and drifted away.

After hours of a much-needed deep rest, the heavy warning weight was gone. Kevin woke to feeling that his thrashed heels were better. There was a wetness on his exposed foot and around his toes. He immediately pulled his foot back under the sleeping bag. Then, a big black dog came around to the side of the bunk and licked Kevin across the face. "I remember you. You're Tucker." Kevin stuck his arm out and rubbed the Labrador's head.

Tucker tugged and pulled the sleeping bag off the bunk. Kevin remembered being on a deck, clothed, and gathering firewood. *I must have been dreaming about a nurse wrapping my wounds and warming me.*

Kevin rolled his legs over the side of the bunk and sat up. Small French Pane windows peaked at the top of the front cabin wall. Out through the glass was an old snag silhouetted by the rising sun. The wood planking felt warm on his swollen feet. Kevin stood gingerly, shuffled to the railing, and looked over the cabin below. There was a stone fireplace with a mantle and two hooks. Pushed up against the thirty-foot bank of glass panes was an old green pine table with an empty whiskey bottle on top of some mail.

Each step down the stairs pulled on the gauze on Kevin's heels. Draped on the bottom railing were his clothes neatly hung. Kevin grabbed his clothes and moved next to the dwindling orange logs in the fireplace. The radiant heat and dry clothes felt comforting, both physically and mentally. Tucker was at the door, wagging his tail. When Kevin opened it, Tucker exploded off the deck and into the dawn of a new day.

The old wooden chair creaked as he sat opposite a vintage long gun. The rising sun felt good as it came through the windows at the back of the cabin. Through a missing front window pane, a draft blew across Kevin. A paper, tucked under an empty whiskey bottle, looked official with the State of Oregon seal and the big red letters stamped "DENIED" across it. The Kenneth Saxton name felt familiar. Kevin went on reading and then stopped. *What am I doing? This isn't my business*. He flipped the letter over and slid it back under the whiskey bottle.

The chair creaked again as Kevin stood and started taking mental notes. Every wall displayed a deer or elk rack. Above the mantle on the river rock fireplace were hand-forged hooks. His bare feet felt the gritty dirt on the floor as he moved toward the mantle with the rifle. Kevin's right hand gripped the cold steel of the barrel. He lifted it toward the brass hooks and noted the strong odor of gunpowder. Grandpa Trask sporterized several vintage deer rifles. Sadly, Kevin was so involved in sports and club activities that they never found time for a hunting trip.

Suddenly, frantic barking came from out front. Kevin rushed out on the deck and put the butt of the vintage rifle against his shoulder to look through the scope. A weak chirping-like whistling called out. Everything got magnified and sharpened on an Eagle that landed on the top branch of the old snag. Kevin stared through the scope for the longest time, but the giant raptor didn't fly off. Through the scope, he saw a white crown and an orange eye. *That's a Bald Eagle. I have never seen one in the wild.*

The sound of a diesel motor in the distance caused the massive bird to turn its head. *Wow, that bird is blind in one eye*. *Wow, it must have a six-foot wing span*. The Eagle flew from the top of the old snag and was gone.

Kevin lowered the rifle and listened. The sound was getting louder. He surveyed the dirt road. To the left and across a clear-cut field, he saw an orange truck winding its way up the mountain. It suddenly disappeared into old-growth Douglas fir. Kevin listened as the rattling pickup meandered closer. He returned the rifle to his shoulder and scanned ahead to the next clearing. The 4x4 truck darted out from the tree canopy.

In the crosshairs, Kevin could see a female driver. *That's the fishing guide! That's the old truck I rode in last night.* Kevin sighted in on Lilly's head, her long ponytail flipped from shoulder to shoulder. The orange work truck vanished into low-hanging fir bows. Kevin scanned ahead to the next clearing. The windshield popped back into sight. W*hat striking dark blue eyes. Tina would never have a ponytail. I wonder why she never got her teeth straightened.* The truck skidded to a stop, and Tucker ran out of the woods.

Kevin lowered the rifle and watched Lilly jump out of the cab and stomp toward the cabin. "You bastard! Why were you pointing that rifle at me?"

"I was using the scope to look through. Like binoculars."

Lilly rushed up the stairs and tore the long gun from Kevin. She pointed the barrel at his chest! "How do you like it?"

Kevin stepped back. "I was only using the scope. I didn't even have my finger on the trigger."

Lilly lowered the rifle, pulled back the bolt, and was shocked when an empty shell casing ejected and then bounced across the deck. *That's weird. This thirty-aught-six has been hanging on the mantel for as long as I can remember. It's never been loaded—*

Kevin pleaded, "I didn't have my finger on the trigger."

Lilly shook her head in disgust, walked by Kevin, and mumbled, "Stupid rich kid. You never point a gun at anyone unless you plan to kill them."

Inside the cabin, she placed the rifle above the fireplace mantle. She returned to the porch and said, "Let's go. I'll drive you back to Timberline Lodge to your car."

"I need to get my shoes," Kevin went back inside the cabin.

Lilly moved to the front bank of windows to keep an eye on Kevin. Glass crunched under her boots*. It looks like a pane got broken out from the inside*. Her eyes locked on the white paper under the whiskey bottle on the table. Back inside, she picked up the letter from the State of Oregon. *This explains why Dad never came home one night last week.*

"I'm ready," Kevin said in his loosely laced, cut-up boots at the cabin door.

Lilly looked up. "Okay… I'm going to close up the cabin. I'll be right there."

The four-wheel drive pickup's passenger door had a large, round emblem displaying the words "Saxton Logging." Kevin vaguely remembered the emblem from last night. He gingerly slipped onto the bench seat, slamming the door twice to get it to latch. Lilly was on the deck, sweeping up broken glass. *It's not my business. But a gun, an unemployment letter, and—*

Lilly locked up and put her index finger and thumb into her mouth. She whistled loudly and then yelled, "Tucker, let's go."

The big black Labrador came lumbering from around the back of the cabin and ran to the driver's door. When she opened the door, Tucker jumped onto the floorboard, onto the bench seat, and crawled onto Kevin's lap. Lilly pulled herself up and in by the steering wheel. "Tucker likes you."

The old truck rattled and bounced as Lilly drove down Forest Road 30. Kevin noticed a washed-out bridge ahead and was just about to yell when Lilly grabbed a shifter in the center of the cab and pushed it forward. The old truck bogged down, and she steered to the left, going off the road. The old rig bounced and groaned as water splashed over the hood. The tires started to spin, Lilly feathered back on the gas pedal, and the tread gripped. The old rig crawled up the other side of the stream bed.

"The environmentalists would love to see you drive," Kevin said excitedly.

"Screw the environmentalists!" Lilly replied as she steered the truck back onto the road.

Kevin looked down at his feet, which rested in two inches of oily dirt on the floorboard. "I hardly remember anything last night. But someone cut up my boots."

"City folk are pretty soft. That's why we call you all Tenderfoots." Lilly looked over at Kevin and forced a smile. "One piece of advice. When you build a fire, don't lay the logs together like they're spooning."

Kevin glanced over. *Maybe I wasn't dreaming last night?*

"You need to leave some space between the logs for air and use some kindling," Lilly added as she steered the old truck.

"One thing that I recall or dreamed last night," Kevin looked forward, unsure how to ask. "Last night under those sleeping bags. I remember or dreamed of a pleasant, sweet smell warming me that turned into a sour locker room smell."

Lilly reached over and started rubbing Tucker's back. "You're just lucky Tucker didn't go for a swim yesterday. He'd have stunk like a skunk."

Now, it was Lilly's turn to ask an awkward question. "The rifle you pointed at me. Did you take it off the fireplace?"

Kevin hesitated. He should never have read someone else's mail. "No, it was leaning against the table." There was a dead silence.

The old gravel road ended at a paved road. Lilly didn't stop or put on the turn signal. The old pickup felt like it would roll as she shot onto the highway and turned left. Kevin pulled and tightened up his seatbelt. The yellow sign indicated curves for the next 6 miles up to Timberline Lodge. The tall mud tires howled on the pavement, and the high center of gravity felt unsafe. Lilly navigated the curves at a high rate of speed. About four miles up the Timberline Road, Kevin finally spoke up. "I'll pay your family for letting me stay in that cabin and for the transportation. That is, if we get there!"

With both hands on the steering wheel and staring straight ahead, Lilly replied, "Pay for staying in our dusty old cabin?"

"Yes, I owe you for that. Plus, I owe your Dad for helping me off the mountain last night."

"You don't owe anything for staying in our cabin. And I must keep my brother's stuff, for my dad's sake."

Kevin's mind pictured the crampon bouncing down Crater Rock, then wedging between two boulders. "I lost one crampon… But I can get it with a rope and some new boots."

Lilly paused for the longest time. "That old equipment wasn't worth all the money you offered. Mom and Dad wanted to hang on to it for personal reasons."

"I know exactly where the crampon is. It got wedged at the base of a thirty-foot rock outcropping on the rim of the crater," Kevin said in a quick response. "With a hundred-foot rope and proper-fitting boots, I'll climb down and get it."

Lilly pushed on the gas pedal and drove carelessly. She mumbled to herself. "Dumb rich guy didn't learn his lesson on his first solo attempt. More do-or-die stupidity."

Kevin could feel the tension in the cab and ignored it. The old four-wheel drive felt like it would roll on every corner; he tuned that out as best that he could. When they arrived at the Timberline Lodge parking lot, Kevin nervously pointed. "My car is over there!"

Lilly didn't say anything while accelerating toward a State Police car.

"Looks like I'm getting a ticket," Kevin said, seeing a stocky man bent over, peering through the windshield of the SL600.

"You should slow down!" Kevin wrapped his arms around Tucker.

Lilly came to a swift and abrupt stop twenty feet from the two cars! The bulky, oversized patrol officer reared up, and a black braid flipped down his back. White teeth broke out in a big smile against dark red skin. The Native American walked around to the

driver's window of the old pickup. "What are you doing, big Sis? Trying to run me down?"

"Nobody can run you down, so you're Bull Elk. You're just too fast and mean."

"Too mean? I'm a gentle giant," replied Bull.

"Gentle, huh? Tell that to all those defensive linemen you used to mow over. Dad still says you were the meanest running fullback he ever watched."

Both smiles subsided when Bull asked. "How is your father?"

"He's having a bad week. His unemployment ran out. Then he went up on the mountain last night to get this guy." Lilly pointed at Kevin.

"I bet that was hard. Is that the first-time up here since Billy's accident?"

Lilly's hands tightened on the steering wheel. She turned away from Bull and stared through the windshield, glaring at Mount Hood. "Yeah, it's his first time up past the tree line. Dad's taking it hard."

"Is he still drinking too much?"

"Yeah, he drank last night after he picked up Kevin, the college guy." Lilly pointed toward the passenger side of the pickup

"Kevin? You don't mean Kevin Trask, do you?" Bull rapid-fired the question.

"Yeah, I do." Lilly leaned back in the seat so that Bull could see across the cab.

"You're the guy I'm looking for. There's a state-to-state APB out for you."

"A state-to-state, APB. What's that?"

"It's an all-points bulletin from California to Oregon," Bull looked down at a notepad. "The Redding Police Department transmitted it."

Kevin's hand found the door latch. He warily lowered himself out of the truck. Tucker followed.

Officer Bull quickly moved to the other side of the truck, preparing to give chase if needed. "You're not going to run, are you?" Bull positioned himself in front of Kevin.

"Run! Why would I do that?" Kevin rubbed his forehead. "I gave the Redding Police all the information about that boy I had in my car."

"I need you to take a seat in the back of the patrol car." Bull took hold of Kevin by the arm.

"What's this about?" Kevin tried to pull from Bull's grip.

Bull was two inches shorter but looked twice as wide. When he felt Kevin try to resist, his reaction was swift and skilled. Bull quickly slapped on a handcuff. "Give me your other hand, or I'll take you to the ground!"

Kevin stopped resisting. "I didn't do anything. I want to call my lawyer!"

Bull handcuffed Kevin. "Where are the car keys?"

"They're under the spare tire. The trunk isn't locked."

Lilly had a good vantage point from behind the steering wheel. She was now watching Bull force Kevin into the back seat of the police car. "Stop resisting!"

Bull reached for the two-way radio in the car. With the coiled cord streaming from his hand, he pushed the red button on the microphone. "This is Officer Bull Whitefoot. I just apprehended Kevin Trask. There is an APB out for him from Redding, California. Please call and advise me on further instructions." Bull put the microphone back on a clip in the center of the dash.

Lilly slid out of the pickup. "What the hell is going on? Is this Trask guy wanted for doing something to a boy?"

"Don't know. The APB printout states to look for a Mercedes SL 600 race car that will be registered to a Chinese import business."

"You think he hurt or killed someone?"

"Don't know. Usually, we're warned if the suspect is armed or dangerous. It could be an outstanding warrant or?" Bull hesitated. "Lilly, I shouldn't be telling you any of this. Please don't repeat anything I just told you."

"I won't." Lilly ducked down and looked at Kevin through the back window of the patrol car. She immediately stood up when they made eye contact and flashed a thought. *College preppy guys are always into weird sex stuff.*

"How's your mom doing?" Bull asked, waiting for the reply from dispatch.

"She is almost out of her prescriptions. The spotted-owl logging shutdown is hurting a lot of families."

"At least on the reservation, we're not governed by that environmental crap. Do you want me to put in a word to the Rez Foreman? They're thinning out beetle-killed trees and using them for firewood. The elders want to remove that dead fuel before we have fires too hot to fight."

"That would be great, Bull."

"It's been two years since Billy's accident?"

"Two years this July fifth," answered Lilly. "Mom is doing much better than Dad. Except for her hip. She never complains and prays her Rosary at least twice a day."

Kevin listened to every word from the back seat.

"What about you? How are you doing with Billy being gone?"

"I'm okay. However, this made-up crisis, which involves shutting down all logging due to the Spotted Owl, is utter nonsense. Wait until the uncontrollable fires burn up half of Oregon."

"Lilly, tell your dad to send me a proposal for falling beetle kill on the reservation. All he'll need to do is post a hundred-thousand-dollar insurance bond. I can get him the work," Bull said confidently.

"Thanks, Bull. Do you think they'd take our family cabin as collateral for the insurance bond?"

"I can ask," Officer Bull quipped in a subdued voice while using Kevin's key fob to open the trunk of the concept Mercedes. He immediately spotted a red rag behind the spare tire. Wrapped inside the shop rag was a Texaco water bottle—from its weight. Bull suspected drugs.

Bull carried the water bottle to the cruiser's rear window. "Mr. Trask, do you want to tell me what is in here, or do I need to get a search warrant?"

"It's not mine! Open it if you want." At this point, Kevin wasn't thinking.

Officer Bull popped off the plastic lid, turned it upside down, and a roll of hundred-dollar bills dropped into his hand. *Drug money,* Bull suspected.

"You found my cash stash," Kevin blurted

"Rich, privileged brat," Lilly whispered, then drove off.

"Officer 378, this is dispatch," blared from the two-way radio.

Bull reached into the driver's door for the microphone. "This is Officer Whitefoot, badge number 378, over."

"Officer Whitefoot, I just spoke with the Redding police department. The broadcast is for Mr. Kevin Trask to call home. Don't apprehend or arrest. His family got Senator Byron Sherpard involved. Two of their lake patrol officers are now on leave for false arrest and sexual misconduct."

"What!" Bull yelled into the microphone. "Are you sure?"

"Yes, don't arrest or apprehend. Just tell the subject to call home. This should have been a courtesy request from the Redding State Police. Not an all-points bulletin."

"Crap!" Bull tossed the microphone onto the front seat and yanked open the back door. "I'm sorry, Mr. Trask. Step out, and I'll get the handcuffs off. I was doing my job! They said it was an APB. I hope you understand." Officer Bull quickly unlocked the handcuffs.

Kevin examined the red indentation on his wrist. "This is the second time I've been handcuffed for no reason. No wonder the public distrusts law enforcement."

"Sorry, Mr. Trask. I hope they weren't too tight."

"I think you did something to my shoulder when you twisted my arm up behind my back." Kevin massaged his shoulder.

"I can run you into the hospital if you need," offered Bull.

"I should be okay, but you're no gentle giant."

"We're trained to get the offensive jump on our suspects."

"You look like you could stop a freight train. Who would want to fight you?"

"I'm sorry about the mix-up," Bull apologized again. "You must be important to have a senator involved."

"Oh, it's not me. It's my father. He's got a lot of political friends."

"Is your father the CEO of Trask Trailers?"

"Yep," Kevin quipped. "It was my grandfather who started the company."

"Wow, I read about your father when I was in college, wrapping up my business degree. He was CEO of the year or some award like that."

"My dad has won many awards." Kevin paused, swallowed, and his voice deepened. "After World War II, my grandfather founded the company in an abandoned Navy training building. He is the one who set many things in motion for me early on."

"My grandpapa also set my life into motion. Without his influence, I wouldn't be in law enforcement."

"I hear you…" Kevin didn't like talking about family. "You said that the APB came from the Redding Police Department?"

"Yes, it did. Would you like to see it?"

"Sure." Kevin watched Bull retrieve paperwork.

There were several pieces of computer fanfold paper on a clipboard. Bull flipped over a few pages.

Kevin looked over the computer printout:

ABP California State Police <Redding office>
Silver Mercedes 600 SL Racing model
California Plate# <6588 CJJL>
Registered to: < Hung Meng Shipping Int.>
Possibly Headed North to Oregon
Call Sheriff Wilson at 555-402-4321

Kevin handed back the clipboard. *I wonder why my car got registered with a Chinese shipping company.*

"Are you headed to the Casino with your cash stash?" Bull stuffed the wad of hundreds back into the Texaco water bottle.

"There's a casino way up here?" Kevin asked.

"Not up here. Our casino is on the Rez."

"Rez?" Kevin questioned Bull again.

"The Warm Springs Reservation." Bull snapped the lid onto the water bottle and handed it to Kevin. "The casino is east on Highway 26, about forty miles from here."

"That's strange." Kevin was still reading the report. "There's nothing about the little boy, Benny."

"Mr. Trask, you might want to call Sheriff Wilson. Maybe he can explain why he put out an APB instead of a courtesy notification?" Bull offered. "But I need to know if your arm is okay." He was fearing an excessive force charge.

"Don't worry about my arm." Kevin rubbed his shoulder. "I'd like that phone number. I want to see if there is additional information about Benny."

Bull tore out one section of the fan-folded computer paper from his clipboard. "Here, take this."

"Thanks," Kevin took the piece of paper. "Do mobile car phones work up here?"

"I don't know. It's touch-and-go with my two-way radio. Sometimes, I have to move around the parking lot to get through to dispatch in Warm Springs."

"Thanks." Kevin noticed the Saxtons' pickup truck coming back across the parking lot.

Bull noticed, too. "Lilly must have forgotten something."

Kevin focused on Tucker's head hanging out the passenger window. A pink tongue and slobber were flying in the wind. Lilly parked with Kevin on the passenger side. She pushed Tucker off the bench seat, leaned over, and held out a piece of paper. "Here's the advertisement you left on the counter at the store. I thought the poem on the back might be important."

Kevin focused on the front of Lilly's cotton shirt. She wasn't wearing a bra. He reached in and patted Tucker's head. "Thanks for warming me up last night. You stinky old dog."

Kevin took the tri-fold advertisement. "I do plan to be back to catch some steelhead."

Lilly pulled herself up by the steering wheel. "If you come back, call first to see if the Steelhead are running."

"Oh, I plan to be back," Kevin assured.

Lilly leaned over again and opened the glove box to get a business card. Again, Kevin looked down the front of the loose cotton shirt. She handed Kevin a **Saxton Logging** business card. *Why'd I do that?* I just gave him our advertisement. Lilly felt an unexpected blush warming her face. She straightened up, waved at Bull through the windshield, and drove away. Her face was flushed.

Kevin unsnapped the water bottle and slipped the business card between the hundred-dollar bills.

"Everything okay with your shoulder?" Bull asked, walking back toward the patrol car, worried about an excessive force charge.

"I think so? I'm going to circle the parking lot to see if I can get a cell signal." Kevin opened the 600 SL door and yelled, "Hey, Mean Bull Elk, catch this."

Kevin passed the water bottle, and Bull made a one-handed catch. "Keep me posted about the insurance bond."

"Good pass, Paleface. I'll get this to Trask Senior."

"Don't let him know where the money came from."

"No problem." Officer Bull opened the trunk to stash the cash.

Kevin circled the parking lot several times. There was no cell service. He started down the steep, treacherous Timberline Lodge Road. The road was similar to the Trinity Loop Road on Mt. Shasta. *I wonder if they are having a funeral service for Benny? I should send flowers*.

The green and white sign read **Alpine Campground next right.** Kevin immediately applied the brakes. His thrashed bare feet were numb. He felt a cool, weeping sensation from the open flesh on his heels. The race-ready SL 600 hunkered down. Kevin yanked the steering wheel, and the concept car skidded all four wheels. Slow motion took over. He released the footbrake, pulled on the handbrake, and turned the car in the opposite direction. Same as Benny had when they sped down Mount Shasta. A bald eagle soared over the cliff as the dust cleared. The car skidded to a stop a couple of feet from a concrete historical marker.

With lights flashing, the patrol car stopped behind the concept car's rear bumper. Officer Bull jumped out. "Holy COS! You almost took my uncle's memorial head on."

Kevin's heart pounded. "I didn't think I was going that fast!"

"I was clocking you from the parking lot. You hit over sixty miles an hour on one of the straight stretches."

"Wow, I was daydreaming about Benny. It was almost like he was in the passenger seat again."

"Are you on a mission to join up with him?" Bull pulled his ticket ledger from his shirt pocket

"No, but the past two weeks have been hell." Kevin walked toward the large brass memorial plaque.

Bull was looking for a metal VIN tag through the windshield when he noticed the dusty fingerprints. "Looks like someone was casing your car."

Kevin stopped and turned. "Why do you say that?"

"Look at the big spread of fingers and the scarred palm. This handprint is from an adult who works with his hands."

"How do you know that?" Kevin asked.

"Behind every track is a story."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"An animal track. You look for how big, how old, how wise. You track an animal the same way it tracks you. A Mountain Lion will get your scent, track you for days, and even step into your footprints to know the size and weight of the prey before it strikes."

"That's interesting. Where did you learn that?"

"From Eagle Eye, my grandfather." Bull lifted the wiper blade with his pen.

Kevin retrieved the tri-fold brochure and pointed at the packing tape and handprint. "Does this tell you anything?"

Bull securitized the prints under the packing tape. "Who are you, Sherlock Holmes?"

"Kind of, a waitress told me about Benny leaving me a note on the windshield. I found that thank-you note under my car's front tire, in a puddle of brake fluid. A dust image appeared on the windshield when I drove through blowing dirt in Southern Oregon. I had one of those spiritual moments when I knew the fingerprints meant something. Do you know what I mean?"

"Yes, I do know." Bull held the brochure up to the sun. "This is a good print since light pressure was applied, probably so as not to set off the car alarm. This elongated palm callous could be from swinging an ax or maybe playing a lot of golf."

"How can you tell all that?" Kevin asked

Bull turned his hand over and pointed. "I still burn firewood. This callus is from splitting ten cords of wood with an ax yearly. Scars and calluses tell a story. My missing middle finger has a story. My Grandfather taught me to pay attention to detail. Look for the intent when you track prey. Don't become the hunted."

"Eagle Eye! That was your grandfather's name?" Kevin asked.

"Yes, that is what he went by on the Rez. He was blind in one eye. He went by Mike when he dealt with the Whiteman."

"The Rez?"

"The Confederated Warm Springs Reservation. We are comprised of Wasco, Tenino, and Paiute Native Americans. My father's brother was Nelson Wallulatum. He was the chief of the Wasco tribe after serving in the US Navy. After serving this country, Chief Nel helped install a fish ladder to enable fish to pass around the Pelton Dam. The fish ladder got abandoned in the Sixties. Uncle Nel never got over it."

"Something similar happened to my grandfather. There was an old fish tunnel on the property he purchased for Trask Trailers. After World War II, he wanted to convert it into a fishing pool for autistic children, but the plan was never realized. Grandpa Don never could get fish to swim from the Long Beach Harbor to the pool in the parking lot."

"Fooling with Mother Nature is risky, just like the Spotted Owl debacle. It's going to backfire on the White Man," Bull frowned.

"You're right, and that's one of the reasons I'm not going to work at the family business."

"I noticed your Blue Devil Basketball jersey in the trunk. Maybe you should try out for the NBA?"

"I'm burnt out on the competitiveness. I no longer have the passion. Plus, I'm not NBA material."

"Smart move. If you don't have the passion, don't let self-pride run your life."

"I might get back into tennis." Instinctively, Kevin rubbed his thumb on the torn skin across the palm of his right hand. Water skiing on Lake Shasta had aggravated the blisters earned from playing tennis with the foursome at the Pasadena Country Club.

Bull noticed. "Let me take a look."

Kevin turned his hands palms up. "I don't have working hands."

"I got something for that." Bull went to the patrol car's trunk and got some balm from a first-aid kit. He returned with a small buckskin pouch that had a beaded drawstring. "Use this sparingly on open flesh."

Kevin put the leather pouch up to his nose and took a whiff. "I'm not going to rub this stuff on raw flesh. I'm sure the AMA did not approve it?"

"Don't need to be. The medicine woman on the Rez doesn't peddle it outside our borders."

Kevin took another whiff of the bag. "Thanks, but I'll pick up something at a drugstore." Kevin took another deep whiff from the leather bag.

Bull dropped a pair of moccasins at Kevin's feet. "At least take these to protect your shredded feet."

Kevin slipped on the moccasins and took another long, extended sniff into the buckskin pouch. "These slippers must be magical. I feel like I'm floating in them."

"You're not floating. You're getting high from sniffing peyote healing salve." Bull said with a stiff warning.

Kevin opened the passenger door, and it felt like he was floating down to the passenger seat. "I guess I will rub some balm on since a medicine woman concocted it." Kevin took the pouch.

"After it starts to burn, don't apply anymore. You shouldn't drive for at least forty-five minutes after that," Bull warned.

"It's getting warm already." Kevin laughed as he rubbed the ointment into his right hand. "Wow, this stuff is really, really helping." Kevin put the leather pouch up to his nose again. "What is in this stuff?"

Bull grabbed the bag from under Kevin's nose. "It's Peyote, pine pitch, Juniper berries, and antler shaving mixed into fish oil. My Grandpapa introduced it to me the day he whacked off my finger. That was the same day he poked out his eye."

"Wow… Your Grandfather cut off your middle finger. Was that an Indian ritual or something?" Kevin's Peyote-induced thoughts flowed freely over his lips and out of his mouth.

"No, Grandpapa never forgave himself. That is a story for another day." Bull paused. "Give me your car keys, and recline your seat."

Kevin pulled the keys from the ignition. "Here you go, Running Bull Elk, big Indian guy." Kevin reclined, his eyes closed on their own. *Wow, what my grandfather did to me was a life lesson. It was nothing like cutting off a finger or a circumcision ceremony.*

Bull went back to the police car and started writing his report. He truthfully reported about the manhandling, handcuffing, and shoving of Kevin into the back of the police cruiser. His Grandpapa always preached, 'You can't soar with a lie on your wings.'

Thirty minutes later, Bull was back at the passenger door and shook Kevin's shoulder. "Mr. Trask, we should go to the lodge and get some coffee and food before you start driving."

Kevin's eyes were glazed over. He blinked a few times and rubbed his forehead. "How long have I been asleep?"

"Maybe half an hour." Bull answered.

"Where did you go?" Kevin asked and then opened the passenger door.

"I had to fill out a report," Bull dry swallowed, concerned about the false arrest and police brutality reporting.

"Make sure you report that you are the best lawman slash medic I've ever dealt with." Kevin frolicked to the cruiser, opened the rear door, and entered the transport cage.

Bull locked the SL 600 and placed a yellow "not-to-tow" ticket under the wiper blade.

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The **Lumberjack** restaurant inside Timberline Lodge had vintage logging equipment on display. Kevin's mind was still spinning from the peyote. "That Saxton family. Ah… Have they been loggers for a long time?"

"They've been logging for as long as I can remember." Bull replied.

"Oh… Why didn't the Lilly girl get her teeth fixed? She sure is tall."

"They have been down on their luck, even before their son's accident."

"Was it a logging accident?" Kevin asked.

"No, Billy died up on this mountain two years ago on the fifth of July."

"How'd that happen?" Kevin sip-tested the steaming hot coffee.

"He was climbing the Devil's Kitchen route when a rock the size of a basketball hit him directly in the head. He died instantly."

Kevin set the coffee cup down. He didn't want to know but asked anyway. "You think that was Billy's climbing equipment that I rented from Lilly?"

"Probably," Bull quipped. "Lilly is trying to get a fishing guide service up and running. No more mountaineering for the Trask family."

No wonder there was reluctance to rent the climbing equipment. I will hike back up there and find that crampon, even if I have to stay here for a week. The peyote still had Kevin's mind rolling and banging like tennis shoes in a dryer.

"How much was in your stash cash bottle? I should write you a receipt."

"I think about five thousand, maybe less."

That's clever to wrap an oily red shop rag around it. I almost didn't pick it up.

"Bull, what was all that stuff about a firewood contract bond you were talking to Lilly about?" Kevin flip-flopped the subject again.

"The Tribal Council has been trying to find a bonded company to deliver firewood to the Kahneeta resort. None of the tribal people want to do it because they want the higher-paying jobs in the new casino. The tips can be over a hundred dollars a day." Bull replied.

"Wow, that sounds good for your people."

"We'll see… Or it will be another issue that Native Americans can blame on the White man when the money stream runs dry. No different than fishing."

"Bull, I'm not sure every problem on an Indian Reservation is the fault of the White man!"

"I was being sarcastic, Mr. Trask. Blame is a weapon the evil spirits use to keep all men from facing their weakness. No matter the skin color."

"Got it, Bull."

"Use my stash cash to float the bond for the Saxtons."

"Richard might be too proud to take a handout."

Over an early lunch, Bull and Kevin put together a plan. As they left the restaurant, Kevin handed Bull one of the Trask corporate gold-embossed business cards. "Keep me updated."

Officer Bull gave Kevin a ride back to his car. "Are you good to drive?"

"No problem." Kevin waved and then checked the bag-phone. A signal was nonexistent. He headed back to Timberline Lodge. There was a bank of payphones inside the oversized hand-built front doors. "Condi, I need to give you a heads up on a call you should get from a Bull Elk or Running Bull. He's the same guy."

Condi wasn't listening. "Kevin! I've been trying to reach you since last Thursday!" Her voice vibrated the glass partitions separating each pay phone.

"Whoa, hold on, Condi," Kevin spoke in a slowed, calming voice. "I didn't get any messages. That car phone only works around big cities."

"Then, get to a big city by Monday and be on the Trask Private Corporate line. They will ask if your dad can take a proxy vote for your shares. If you say yes, trailer manufacturing will get outsourced."

"Wait a second, slow down! Who are they?"

"The Hung Meng manufacturing plant in China!" Condi replied.

"Pulling up a manufacturing plant and moving is difficult."

"Kevin, China already builds all our wiring harnesses, wheels, and axles!"

"What? I didn't know that. When did that happen?"

"A year after you started college. That's why we have had so many layoffs. Some of the workers in the plant are only working twenty hours a week." Condi was tearing up.

"I'm about two hours from Portland, Oregon. Get me a flight tonight, or charter our private jet. I'll be at that meeting!" Kevin slammed down the phone.

He sped down the Timberline Lodge Wilderness Road and turned west. Half a mile ahead at the summit on Highway 26, he pulled into the Government Camp rest area to get his flight information. The **Out of Order** sign on the phone booth's bi-fold door foiled that plan.

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The Reindeer bells on the back of the door rang out when Kevin hurried in. "I'll be with you as soon as I finish with this customer." Lilly was bent over filling out a contract and didn't look up.

The eighty pounds of black fur rushed from behind the glass display case. Lilly saw Kevin rubbing Tucker's head out of the corner of her eye. She purposely didn't acknowledge him.

"Lilly, could I use your phone? It's important!"

"That fancy car phone not working?" Deep down, Lilly was glad that it wasn't.

"I'll call collect or pay the long-distance fee."

"Follow me." Lilly led Kevin down the narrow hallway into a small kitchen. "The phone is on the wall over there." She pointed at a yellow corded wall phone hanging just to the left of a small kitchen table and returned to help her customer.

Kevin lifted the headset off the chrome cradle and dialed. "Condi, did you get a flight?"

"You're booked on a flight that departs from Portland, Oregon, at seven-ten. You need to be at the airport by five. You'll arrive at LAX just before midnight. I'll have a limo waiting. You're on standby for first class." Condi rattled off the instructions.

"What's the flight number?" Kevin asked while moving the yellow wall phone handset to his other ear.

Mary Saxton turned from the sink and pointed at a pencil and a tablet on the small table. The yellow coiled phone cord pulled taut as Kevin reached for the pencil and paper.

"Flight 709 on United Airlines. Terminal two." Condi's words came over the handset as Kevin repeated them, writing them down.

"Thanks." Kevin hung the headset back on the cradle and peeled off a page from the tablet.

"United Airlines, that's my old employer." Mary offered.

"Oh, what did you do for them?" Kevin asked.

"I was a stewardess back in the day," Mary replied with a hint of pride, all while trying to stand taller without the aid of her walker. "That was before I married a logger."

"Thanks for the use of the phone," replied Kevin as he exited the small kitchen.

Lilly was coming back when they met face-to-face in the connecting hallway. "Did you get your important call made?" She asked, stepping to the side.

Kevin stepped to the same side. "I did." Kevin stepped to the opposite side at the same time Lilly did. "Should we dance?" Kevin joked.

"I don't dance much," Lilly sniped.

The scent of baby powder reminded him of being under the sleeping bags in the old rustic cabin. "Thanks for not letting me freeze to death last night." Kevin stepped to the center of the hall, blocking Lilly.

"You should be thanking Tucker," Lilly replied as she looked away from Kevin's green eyes. Her heart was pounding so hard she hoped it wasn't echoing off the narrow hallway walls.

"Maybe someday we should go to dinner and dance the night away." Now standing toe-to-toe and practically mouth-to-mouth, it took all his strength not to push her up against the wall, press himself into her, and kiss her while ravaging his hands under her cotton shirt.

Lilly slid around Kevin, "I bet you used that line on all your college conquests." She disappeared around the corner into the kitchen and heard the sound of the bells on the door as Kevin left. She plopped down at the small table and buried her head in her hands. Tucker came over and nuzzled his head against her leg.

"I hope that nice young man comes back. I overheard that they were having layoffs. I didn't mean to listen. Someone booked a flight on my old airline for him."

"Mom, I'm not good enough for a guy like him," Lilly said in a dismal tone.

Mary turned back toward the sink so Lilly couldn't see the tears falling from her face into the vase of cut flowers. "Your father always told me he wasn't good enough to marry me. Yet here we are, for better or for worse. I love him more today than when we married at Timberline Lodge with a few of his old logger friends, and then we honeymooned in the old cabin."

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Class distinction never rests—no matter what time or place in history. Jesus came from a carpenter's family and didn't associate much with the politicians and the well-to-do. The Saxtons were not equal to the Trasks—not even close. Unearned wealth and status were what Kevin didn't want. Not having much is often a blessing. But not building on the abundance from family lineage can be a curse.

Chap 11—————Stuck in the middle

Kevin pushed simultaneously from the middle of two oversized doors into the conference room. Standing there in shorts, an LA Rams jersey, and moccasins that were too casual for Robert Trask. The lawyers barely glanced up from piles of legal documents. Relief immediately came over Condi. Hung Meng and Myung Chan looked as though they were looking at a ghost. Just this morning, the GPS tracker in the concept Mercedes pinged a waypoint in Portland, Oregon.

"What the hell are you doing here?" Trask Senior was shocked!

"I was planning on calling in on the conference line, but when I heard that this meeting is about outsourcing or selling, I hopped on a flight." Kevin walked to the far end of the long conference table and pulled out a chair, leaving about 10 empty seats between himself and the 8 attendees.

Condi stood and looked down the long, glass-topped wooden table. "Mr. Kevin, can I get you a cup of coffee?"

"Thank you, Condi, but I can get my own coffee, but thank you." Kevin headed for a chrome serving cart. Everyone but Condi sat astounded. Kevin poured a cup of coffee from the silver decanter. "You all go right ahead. I'll listen in."

"Well, I guess we can continue," said one of Hung Meng's Lawyers.

Kevin leaned back, listened to the legal jargon remotely, and observed the initialing and signing of documents. He glanced out the window to watch the container ships slowly maneuvering around the Port of Long Beach Harbor. A blue, fully loaded container ship caught Kevin's eye. Growing up at the Trask manufacturing plant, he'd never seen ships so large.

Mr. Meng knew these mega-ships could easily conceal a small submarine underneath their girth. Any satellites spying from 175 miles above the Earth would never detect a thing. Most importantly, Mr. Meng learned that the nuclear payload beneath the ship could not be detected when the ship was loaded with metal containers.

A Trask corporate attorney spoke up. "Kevin Trask can sign now since he is present. There is no need to take proxy votes or use a power of attorney."

"I won't be signing anything until I have a chance to read everything," Kevin said, turning his attention from the view out the window to the far end of the conference table.

Mr. Hung Meng jumped up. "You must sign. You must sign. Deal already made with Mr. Robert Trask."

Kevin slowly stood up. "Mr. Meng, you and your attorneys must not have known that the day I graduated from college, my vote became one-third of every transaction going forward for Trask Enterprises."

Robert Trask jumped in. "That's only if you are on the corporate board."

"Well, I guess I will be taking the VP position you keep hounding me about," Kevin replied.

Hung Meng started yelling Chinese to his two lawyers while Myung Chan walked down the long conference table to Kevin and quietly said, "Nice play."

"I thought so," replied Kevin. "Kind of like our tennis match at the country club when your boss cheated to get what he wanted. I didn't like his attitude then, and not today."

"You might not like Mr. Meng, but if you challenge him to more than a tennis match, you won't win." Myung Chan extended his hand to Kevin.

Kevin shook his hand and immediately noticed something. "Your hand is rough like you chop firewood."

"I'm not a common class worker. I'm a High Songbun, which you call an upper-class or elite in the United States. Same as your family." Myung looked at his hand. "These calluses are from playing tennis and golf."

"I just came across a great Native American ointment that works on blisters," Kevin replied and then pointed at the pink healing skin on the heel of his foot.

Myung looked down and asked, "What kind of shoes are those?"

"They're Moccasins. The person who gave me the ointment for the blisters gave me the shoes." Kevin thought about Officer Bull's words when he had looked at the handprint on the back of the fishing brochure and stated. *This callus print could be from someone who uses a shovel, swings an ax, or handles something.*

"Looks like you put an end to the meeting," Myung Chan said, only for Kevin to hear.

Mr. Hung Meng ordered his attorneys to follow him. Myung Chan jumped in line with the other men as they left the conference room.

"What the hell do you think you are doing?" demanded Robert Trask.

"I want to look over the documents. Especially if we need to outsource some of our manufacturing, after that tennis fiasco at the club, I don't trust Hung Meng."

"Kevin, smarten up. That was only a game! This deal has huge consequences."

"Dad, you need to wise up. If an opponent cheats on the tennis court, he will cheat you in business." Kevin replied in the same manner as his grandfather would have.

"Kevin, do not blow this deal! Hung Meng can pull Trask Enterprises from our sixty-six-million-dollar red financial position."

"What? I thought Trask Inc. was operating at a profit."

"We were up until a few years ago, a couple of lawsuits and some bad press."

"Wow, I didn't know that!"

"I don't want to shut down or sell this manufacturing plant. I built it from your grandfather's small welding operation into a multi-million-dollar trailer company. Everything is on the line. We need to close this deal!"

Kevin started gathering up the piles of legal documents. "Okay, I'll review this stuff. Then Condi can reschedule another signing meeting."

"Great, you can use Richard's office."

"What?" Kevin looked up with a knee-jerk reaction.

"I told you that we might have to let Richard go."

"And I told you that if you let Richard Johnson go, I would not come to work here."

"If you do that, I can cast your one-third proxy vote. Our attorneys already have those documents. Then you can run back to Oregon to fish and climb mountains."

"How did you know I was up in Oregon?"

"Myung Chan told us before the meeting that you were in or around Portland, Oregon." Kevin was without words, adding to the silence in the now half-emptied conference room. *It's like everyone is spying on me. How did Myung Chan know that I was in Oregon?*

Robert Trask realized he had maybe offered too much private information and did an about-face. "Sam, how long will it take to draw up new paperwork with Kevin as VP?"

"I'll have to meet with the attorney who drew up the original Trask trust. By the end of the week, we should have things in order."

Condi practically pushed Kevin from the conference room and then up one flight of stairs to her dad's old office. She shut the door. "Kevin, you need to grow up! This is not about your father or mine. Quit thinking about yourself. You should step up to the plate; your granddad is asking you from above to fix all this. He handed you a privileged life. Isn't it about time for some payback?"

"Payback! What right do you have to tell me that I need to fix the Trask mess? What about Richard? What kind of payback did your dad get?"

"Don't be dragging my dad into this!" Condi replied with tears coming.

"Condi, your dad gave a hundred percent to Trask Inc. I'm going to find out what happened."

"Leave my family out of this mess! I've always been second to my brother. After Jabbar got shot, I thought Dad would treat me differently. But his Islamic faith teaches that a daughter is less important than a son." Condi paused.

"I think that's true with most major religions, for sure with fundamental Christians, Mormons, and Orthodox Catholics. I've never seen a female priest," Kevin offered.

"So, please forget about my family! Granted, Dad lost a son, but I lost my brother." Condi broke down and cried.

Kevin put both arms around Condi and hugged him tightly. He could feel her nappy hair against his neck and wet tears on his shoulder. Condi over-timed their embrace. Finally, she pushed back and wiped at the tears. "Thanks, Kevin. I haven't been held like that since I converted to Christianity. At least, by anyone in my family."

"Condi, I haven't been love-hugged since my grandfather died," Kevin replied, recalling his childhood. "Maybe you and I should have a special hugging time daily," Kevin offered light-heartedly.

"Yeah, a hugging break every workday would be good." Condi smiled.

"I want to look over those papers." Kevin pointed at the pile of documents on her dad's old desk.

"Okay." She walked back to the door. "Sir, do you want me to order lunch for you?" Condi put her hand on the door.

"No lunch and no calling me, sir!" Kevin quipped.

"Sure thing, Huggy Bear," Condie winked. "Just push line five if you need anything or a hug." She left the office.

Kevin approached the one-way window directly behind the desk. From that vantage point, he could overlook the entire manufacturing area. A tinted window on the opposite wall overlooked the employee parking lot, which was once the Long Beach Naval Shipyard. *How'd I get stuck in the middle of this mess? Grandpa and Dad were passionate about building trailers. I'm not. I have my own path, whatever that may be.*

Kevin watched a super container ship slowly leaving the Long Beach harbor at half draft. In college, he'd studied World Economics and understood the implications of the upside-down trade deficit with China, but it wasn't his concern. His grandfather had stashed a gold reserve to get the Trask family through a

Depression or World War III. Like ancient royalty, the Trasks would never be without.

The Johnsons were a typical working-class family. All Richard's achievements were displayed on the wall behind the desk. There were many certificates for meeting or exceeding the annual profit plan, a twenty-five-year safety record, and a gold-star stick pin for not missing a day of work. Meaningless milestones that wouldn't feed a family for one day.

Kevin plopped down in the high-backed leather executive chair and sorted through a stack of mail. He wasn't sure about opening the private mail addressed to Richard Johnson.

Across the room, Binoculars were on top of a locked filing cabinet. Kevin got up and then used them to scan the employee parking lot. A stretch black limo was at the security guard shack. *What is Gus up to with that broomstick and a mirror duct taped on the end?* He watched Gus walk around the limousine, using the mirror to slowly and methodically check the car's underside. The left rear door abruptly opened. Myung Chan jumped out, grabbed the broomstick, broke it over his knee, tossed it at Gus, entered the security shack, and pushed the gate button. The security gate slowly lifted. The stretch black limo sped off with Hung Meng on a satellite phone, talking to partners in China. Gus noted the license plate number, looked at a pocket watch, and memorized both. *Good move, Gus. You piss those guys off, same as I did.*

After thirty minutes of drudging through a union contract, the desk phone rang. "Ah… Kevin, there is a Running Bull Whitefoot on the phone." Condi sounded perplexed. "Is he legit?"

"Yeah, put him through." Kevin's mind flashed to the offer on the mountain he had made. C*lick, click* came over the phone. "Officer Bull, Kevin here."

"Mr. Trask, I had a powwow with the elders this morning. They're good with doing a firewood contract if you'll float the insurance bond."

"We agreed to keep my name out of it. Remember, I don't want the Saxtons thinking it's a handout."

"Yes, I remember. I suggested 'White Pigeon, Earth Friendly Logging, and the Elders are good with that."

"What about using White Eagle, Earth Friendly Logging?"

"A Whiteman will never have Eagle status on the Rez."

"Oh?" Kevin twisted ninety degrees in the executive chair. "I was just with our attorneys and will get them working on an insurance bond. Give me a number where our attorneys can contact your people." Kevin pulled on the center drawer to find a pen; it was locked. "Hold on, Bull, I need to find something to write with."

"No problem, White Pigeon." Bull chided respectfully.

Kevin found a pen next to the fax machine and noticed a sealed manila envelope concealed behind it, with the letters HMMC written across the front. "Okay, give me a number or an address or… or…"

"White Pigeon, you sound distracted."

"Just call me Kevin. Don't joke around." Kevin flipped the manila envelope over.

"Okay, Kevin. Then you should call me Bull, not Officer or Mr. Bull."

"That sounds good," Kevin replied. "Hey, Bull. Do the capital letters HMMC mean anything to you?"

"Maybe somebody's initials followed by the letters MC for Marine Corps."

"Yeah, maybe. Give me the contact information." Kevin wrote the information on the back of the manila envelope. "We'll talk later."

"Yes, getting Ken Trask out into the woods will be good. The hard work will keep his mind from dwelling on the past and off Billy."

"Sounds good," Kevin replied, and an image of Billy's crampon near Mount Hood crater flashed in his head. C*lick.* The phone call ended, and so did the image.

Kevin began sorting papers off the desk and from the Fax machine tray. It was approaching five o'clock when he picked up the sealed manila envelope and rushed down one flight of stairs to the second floor.

Condi's reception desk was behind a four-foot-high curved counter. The marble top had an in-and-out basket for mail and a vase of dried flowers. Where the counter met the wall, there was a coffee pot. Condi glanced up from her desk. "Do you need something?"

"Remember last week you called to tell me about a voice message left on the Trask private line?"

"Are you talking about that strange message in code or something from a young boy?"

"Yes, that one. Did you keep it?" Kevin asked anxiously.

"No, I clear out all the voicemails on Fridays before I go home." Condi noticed the disappointment on Kevin's face. "I recall that you were driving and had to pull over to write the information down. There were the words zerk or zert and the call letters for a radio station or something."

"You're right! I jotted the information on a fishing brochure." Kevin pushed his fingers through his reddish-brown hair. "Are either of our attorneys still here?"

"Yes, Sam is in your dad's office." Condi motioned with her head.

"When they get done, could you send Sam to your dad's old office?"

The words 'dad's old office' caused Condie to pause. "I'll send Sam up when he comes out."

Kevin headed to the ground floor to access the vending machines in the lunchroom. Whispers about the boss's son coming home from college to help with outsourcing had been chit-chat for the last two months. The moccasins, cargo shorts, and LA Rams shirt supported the plant speculation.

After Richard Johnson got fired, the conjecture was that the Trask family no longer cared about building trailers in the USA and that Kevin didn't care. Kevin's plans were not necessarily to party hardy or take road trips in a two-hundred-thousand-dollar concept car. They certainly weren't going to work at the family business.

He climbed the two flights of stairs with coffee and vending machine snacks and pushed open the door with his shoulder. "You wanted to see me?" Sam asked.

Kevin walked behind the desk, pulled the sealed manila envelope from under his armpit, and tossed it on the pile of other stuff. "Sam, I need an insurance bond for a small firewood operation I want to start in Oregon."

"Is the paperwork in here?" Sam picked up the large manila envelope.

"No, but the contact information is there on the back." Kevin pointed.

"What's inside?" Sam asked.

"Don't know. It was behind the fax machine and had Richard Johnson's name on it. Do you think I should open it?"

"Legally, you shouldn't." Sam felt along the edges of the package. "It feels like a stack of photos inside."

"I'll give it to Condi and have her give it to her dad."

"Probably best that you hand deliver it to Mr. Johnson or send it by certified mail." Sam flipped the envelope over. "Is this the contact number for your logging bond?"

Yes, call it and mention Running Bull Lightfoot and White Pigeon logging. You'll be talking with someone on the Warm Springs Rez.

Sam stopped jotting on a yellow legal pad and looked up. "Rez, what do you mean?"

"Rez is short for reservation. I need to float an insurance bond for a small start-up firewood operation in Zigzag, Oregon."

Sam jotted and then stopped. "I'll make contact and then get back to you."

"That would be great." Kevin reached across the desk and shook Sam's hand.

No sooner had Sam gotten down the stairs than the desk phone rang. "Kevin, Tina has been waiting on line three. Would you like me to put her through or take a message?"

"Put her through." He pushed the flashing line 3 button.

"Kevin, where did you go after the cops took you into Redding? Like, you left me there on the lake all by myself."

"Tina, I just had to get away from there. The Sheriff interrogated me as though I were a pedophile or something. I didn't feel like partying or defending my name." Kevin leaned back in the office chair. "Maybe we could talk over dinner tonight?"

"The partying sort of died down after that. Like nothing else big happened." Tina turned down the offer to go out to dinner.

"Frank and Laura gave you a ride home, didn't they?" Kevin rocked forward in the executive chair, waiting for an answer.

"Like they left early, and I stayed. Tim guaranteed he would get me home safe and in one piece."

"Oh?" Kevin leaned all the way forward and rested his elbows on the desk. "So, when did you get home?"

"Late Saturday." Tina paused. "I'm still recovering. We should have dinner another night."

Kevin hesitated. It was unlike Tina not to go out. He finally agreed, "Okay."

"Like we should get together next week and talk and all."

Kevin felt the push-off and needed to know more. "How's Sue feeling with the pregnancy?" Kevin asked to keep the conversation going. "Are you still giving her moral support?"

"Well, I'm not talking to Sue right now. She said bad things about Tim! I want to distance myself from her."

"Tina, you don't think Tim says bad things about other people," Kevin replied defensively. "Tim indicated to Sheriff Wilson that I liked boys or something like that."

"Well, Kevin," Tina paused. "Like, I was wondering that myself? Since we have never gone all the way." Tina paused again. "Kevin, I really should go,"

"Wait, Tina! I do owe you the truth about what happened to me with my grandfather and all. When I was fourteen, he caught me skinny dipping in the pool."

"With another boy?" Tina immediately asked.

"What?" Now, Kevin paused. "No, Tina, it wasn't with a boy," Kevin replied. "It was with Marie Gomez, our housekeeper!" Kevin didn't mean to give up anybody's name, but the female reference was now essential.

"Are you talking about that fat Mexican woman who cleans the Trask mansion?" Tina demanded an answer; she had never liked Marie.

"Yes," Kevin replied, "Maria isn't fat; she's a full-figured Latino woman."

"So, you went all the way with that old Mexican woman?"

"No, we didn't go all the way. But my grandfather caught us in the pool. He made us promise to do different stuff." Kevin hesitated, reflecting on the summer he was fourteen and Marie was older.

"Oh, wow! Like, what did he make you do?" Tina was anxious for spicy gossip.

"Well, I had to mow the lawn every Saturday all summer at a house for unwed mothers. I'm not exactly sure what Marie had to do, but I think she had to take a citizen or history class about the United States."

"That's it, Kevin. You had to mow a yard at a shelter for fat PG girls. That's what made you start messing around with boys? To prevent a pregnancy."

"Where did you hear that I like boys!" Kevin yelled into the handset.

"There were rumors on the houseboat."

"Well, those rumors are wrong!"

"Ah… Like, whatever." Tina was confused.

"There were girls younger than me at that Grandma's Place. Most of the girls were either dropped off or abandoned by their families. One girl didn't even have parents and didn't even know the sperm donor. She'd been abused since age nine. Every girl was afraid to face the next day, unaware of what the future held. That summer experience changed my life and…"

Kevin got distracted when Condi stuck a blue Post-it note to the green desk lamp. It read: **Senator Byron Sherpard is on the other line for you.**

"Kevin, I'm still listening. So, how did mowing grass change you?"

"Hold on, Tina." Kevin covered the handset's mouthpiece. "Condi, can you tell Senator Bryon Sherpard that I will call him back?"

"Kevin, I tried. The Senator insisted that he talk to you. Now!" Condi said it loudly so that Tina would hear.

Kevin moved the phone back up to his ear. "Tina, I'm going to have to call you back."

"Wow, you have to talk to a Senator? You told me you would only start on the assembly line if you went to work for your dad?"

"There was a change of plans," Kevin rushed his words. "Tina, we'll talk later." Kevin hung up the handset. Condi leaned over the desk and pushed the flashing **line 3** on the office phone.

"Hello, Mr. Kevin Trask. Senator Byron Sherpard here. I just wanted to check up on you and make sure that Sheriff Wilson up there in Redding wasn't harassing you or anything."

"Not really?" Kevin rocked back in the office chair. "He did put out an APB on me, but that was just for me to call home."

"Well, that is good. My son had a little run-in with Sheriff Wilson in the Trinity National Forest. I need to stay informed. The Sheriff is running for re-election."

"I remember you mentioned a logging protest and your son."

"Yeah, he's a good kid. He has his priorities mixed up when it comes to the environment. This logging of old-growth timber is becoming a political nightmare," Senator Sherpard stated.

"I just learned about the Spotted Owl and logging operations getting shut down in Oregon," Kevin replied.

"Yeah, this lame, tree-hugging, wacko Vice President is putting a lot of good people out of work," Senator Sherpard paused. "Anyway, Mr. Trask, I called for a favor."

Kevin leaned forward in the chair and rested his elbow on the desk. "And what kind of favor would that be?"

"I'm having a campaign fundraiser. I'm hoping that Trask Trailers would like to purchase tickets for an entire table at the event."

"Let me get back to you on that," Kevin replied.

"That sounds good. So, I can count on you!" Senator Sherpard didn't give Kevin a chance to back out. "It will be a Black-Tie event at the Sacramento Art Center. Each table seats eight; some of your young, influential friends will make great guests. I'll have my staff contact yours." The call ended abruptly.

Kevin slammed the phone, spun around, and walked to the window behind the desk. Sparks were flying from welders, sheet metal pressed, air wrenches bolted on wheels, and forklifts were scooting like rabbits. *I don't want to be a part of Trask Corporate. I'm one month out of school, and deal-making is already controlling my life.*

Kevin left the office and went to the second floor. At Condi's desk, he noticed the open walnut office door.

"Kevin, what is it now?" Condi looked up.

"Where did my dad go?"

"Robert left to have drinks at the country club with Mr. Meng." Condi got up, closed the door, and touched a keypad to set the lock.

"Condi, we'll need to pay for a table at Senator Bryon Sherpard's fundraiser. His people will be contacting you. We must have a slush fund account or something for that kind of event?" Kevin rubbed at his forehead. "It feels like a bribe. He also wants eight influential people to attend his fundraiser."

Condi returned to her desk and made a note. "That was the Senator that kept you out of jail up in Redding, wasn't it?"

"Yeah, and he expects payback now," Kevin answered.

"I also need you to make dinner reservations for Tina and me at the Beverly Wilshire this next weekend. I want the Trask corporate pilot to fly to San Diego to pick her up. It will be a special weekend for us, so send flowers and…"

Condi looked up from the notepad. "It sounds like I need to call the temp agency and get you a secretary ASAP. I can't keep up with everything you have going on."

"I can see you don't have time for everything I've got going on. I have someone in mind looking for employment. I'll give Patty a call."

Kevin took the stairs to the observation floor, two steps at a time, and called Tina back. "Tina, do you have Patty's phone number?"

"What do you want that Skank's number for?"

"Because she told me she was looking for work. Patty was the only one to defend me at the lake."

"I heard her tell the Sheriff that she slept with you. Like, I know you got better taste than bang a whore like her."

"Tina, I need some immediate help. I know she lives in the Los Angeles area. If you don't have her number, I'll call Tim. He keeps a little black book."

"Hold on, I know where I have her number." Tina's life over the last two weeks had been as event-filled as Kevin's. Sue decided to keep the baby and was moving back to Michigan. Tim was distraught and had invited Tina to an overnight festival in Mexico as a friend to vent to.

The pause helped to compose Kevin. Now, he could bring up the main reason he called back.

"Here's Patty's number. Are you ready?"

Kevin jotted down the number. "Tina, we could have dinner at the Beverly Hillshire in downtown LA next weekend. I'll rent the presidential suite, and we can relax and have fun for a few days."

"A… Like, that sounds great," Tina hesitated.

"Great, I'll send the company jet to fly you up from San Diego."

Tina's brain abruptly shifted into reverse. Ah, like… I promised Mom and my stepdad I would go to Tijuana with them for Peter and Paul's party.

"Are you talking about the two saints?" Kevin asked.

"No, I think the two musicians. The Mexicans are having a big festival."

"You might want to double-check your party info. The Feast of St. Peter and Paul is near the end of June." Both **line 2** and **line 3** buttons started flashing.

"Like, how do you know that?"

"I had to take a World Religion class my first year at Gonzaga. I remember those two apostles were always fighting over circumcision doctrine."

"What?" Tina yelped with doubt. "Kevin, don't lie to me."

Factually, Kevin wasn't the one who was not truthful. "Tina, I've got to go. I have two calls coming in."

Bull was on line 2 and needed to know whether White Pigeon Logging would be a Subchapter S corporation or a Subchapter C corporation. Kevin didn't have an answer and told Bull that he would call back after speaking with the Trask attorney.

Line 3 was Senator Byron Sherpard's office, asking to forward them a guest list so they could run background checks. Kevin had yet to commit to the gala dinner fundraiser, but it was implied that he had no choice. Kevin told them that he would get back to them.

Putting his hands up to each side of his head, Kevin yelled in the silence, "I can't deal with all of this meaningless bull shit!" The third floor was also known as the crow's nest. Kevin knew how the small, 450-square-foot top floor got its name. According to Grandpa Trask, the Long Beach Naval Shipyard was established in 1940 when the Navy acquired 104 acres of oceanfront property on Terminal Island from the City of Long Beach. During World War II, parts for Navy ships were refurbished or fabricated in the manufacturing area below. The crow's nest was the lookout where an attack on Long Beach via the Pacific Ocean was watched for. Secret training operations were conducted at ground level below the crow's nest. Grandpa Trask knew little about the Amphibious Scouts and Raiders' training but suspected they used the round water pool to test equipment.

After two hours of going through documents, Kevin pushed back from the desk and went to a window facing south. It looked across Seaside Highway and connected with Nimitz Road, wrapping around a large jetty that protected Long Island Port. The west window looked over the town of San Pedro, and a small north window faced Los Angeles. The east window was a one-way mirror, allowing a view down and over the entire manufacturing area. Kevin recalled how Grandpa Trask would stand behind the one-way mirror and say that a well-paying job was essential to all men. Grandpa Trask would proclaim that the gifts of the Spirit are why these workers' livelihoods are in bigger hands than his. *I don't want this family headache! It worked for my grandfather and father, but it doesn't work for me. I'll place my livelihood with the Spirit. Who knows, logging could be in my future.*

Kevin felt as if he were spying and moved away from the one-way window. He dialed the number Tina gave him.

"Hello." A female voice emerged from the handset.

"Patty, this is Kevin Trask."

'Kevin, it's nice to hear from you. Is everything okay?

"Yeah, everything is okay." Kevin twisted around in the office chair. "At Shasta Lake, you said you were looking for a job, which is why I'm calling."

"Wow, I have been praying and pounding the pavement for weeks," Patty responded in an upbeat tone. "I'm open to cleaning offices, sweeping floors, even landscaping."

"You told me that you were taking computer classes at community college. I thought you could assist me with organizing paperwork here at the Trask plant in Long Beach."

"Kevin, this sounds wonderful. When would you like me to come in for an interview?"

"Patty, I'm kind of up against a wall down here! Could we skip the interview? Would it be possible for you to start tomorrow?" Kevin awkwardly asked.

Patty hesitated. She had been praying for any work close to home. Long Beach was at least twenty miles from Inglewood—too far to walk.

Kevin broke the long pause, "If you need time, let me know, I understand."

"Kevin, I can be there first thing tomorrow." Patty knew that somehow, she could find a ride to Long Beach, even if she had to call Stan.

"Great!" Kevin replied with relief. "Patty, you said you were working on a business degree. Do you know the difference between a subchapter S corporation and a subchapter C corporation?"

"Kevin, besides the tax advantages, the main difference between the two is that a subchapter S is for companies with fewer than seventy-five employees. Subchapter C is for larger employers. Unless you're downsizing, I'd think an established company as large as Trask Trailer is subchapter C. Of course, you would have to take into consideration…"

Kevin interrupted. "I'm not asking for the Trask family business. I'm helping with a small start-up firewood operation for a friend."

"Oh," Patty replied, and then started explaining to Kevin about 1099 contract employers. Ten minutes passed quickly as Kevin filled Patty in on the start-up firewood operation and said that he needed to be a silent partner. The extended phone call ended with Kevin informing her about Gus Watt, the gate guard. Kevin leaned back in the executive chair; thankful he had reached out to Patty.

At the other end, Patty lay back on her bed, folded her hands, and thanked God for answering her prayers. Now, she needed a way to get to Long Beach in the morning.

Chap 12——————Super-Heroes'

Kevin pulled up to the security gate, and Gus exited the guard's shack. "Here you go, Mr. Kevin Trask, your one-day parking pass."

"Thanks, Gus." Kevin took the orange parking card and placed it on the Range Rover's dashboard. "Gus, did you stay out here all night? You were still here when I left last night."

"No, sir, not in the guard station, Mr. Kevin. I always ride down Navy Way Road after locking up to ensure no one tries to enter the tunnel before dark."

"What tunnel, Gus?" Kevin knew better than to ask, but accidentally had a slip of the tongue.

"You know the one Iron Man dug with his Repulsar Drill. Captain America worked on the tunnel, too." Gus pointed south toward the Long Beach Port.

"Both those Superheroes worked on a project together."

"Yes, Sir, Mr. Kevin Trask. Very few people know that the tunnel runs under my guard station and Navy Way Road into the ocean."

"Gus, how long have you been guarding for us?"

Gus put up all ten fingers and counted on them, stopped, and started counting his fingers again. "It's been nineteen years, seven months, and three days since your grandpa gave me a room to guard the Trask property. It was the same day of my Daddy's funeral."

"Sorry, I didn't mean to bring up old memories. I was only three years old way back then." Kevin apologized.

"That is okay. My Mommy and Daddy are together in heaven," Gus replied, looking up into the blue sky. "Now they both watch over me, as Grandpa Trask does over you."

"If you say so." Kevin quietly said, Now, sorry for stirring up the memories.

"No. Mr. Kevin Trask. I know that they are all in heaven. I know it."

"Okay, they all are in heaven." Kevin knew not to get Gus fixated on specific subjects, especially something as controversial as death, burial, or heaven. "Gus, in the four years I've been away at college, have you noticed anything different around here?" Kevin asked, hoping to change subjects.

"Yes, there have been a lot of changes. They put those beeping crosswalk signals and wheelchair ramps on Dock Street, Navy Way Road, Ferry Street, Nimitz Road, Terminal Road, Warf Street, Maersk Road at Pier 400, Seaside Ave, Mariana Street…"

"Ah… Thanks, that's a good thing to know." Kevin knew that if he didn't interrupt Gus, he would hear about every crosswalk in Long Beach that had been upgraded to be ADA-compliant.

"There are more if you need to know." Gus offered with a stoic look.

"No, I'm good," Kevin answered with a smile. "All those new ramps must make it easier with your three-wheeler?"

"Don't know, Mr. Kevin Trask. Someone stole my three-wheeler two years, three months, and 4 days ago." Gus's somber face turned to a slight frown.

"Sorry to hear that." Kevin quipped, hoping for different information. "Have you noticed any changes with the people here at the plant? Do you know Mr. Hung Meng or Myung Chan?"

Gus nervously scanned the parking lot and then whispered. "I don't know Mr. Hung Meng, but Mr. Myung Chan is not a nice person. He broke my bomb inspector yesterday at 10:48 am. I recorded the time in the incident log if you need to see Mr. Kevin Trask."

"Is that what the mirror on the broom handle is?" Kevin asked.

"Yes, Sir, Mr. Kevin Trask." Gus lowered his voice even more. "The evil purple cloud is coming to do battle in the City of Angels."

"Gus, are you talking about Los Angeles?"

"Yes, sir, Mr. Kevin Trask, and we need to make sure all the superheroes know."

The Range Rover started to sputter. Earlier, the tow truck driver said that the battery needed to be replaced. "Gus, we'll talk later. I'm already late."

"Okay, Mr. Kevin Trask. We can talk later. There are still five years, six months, eight days until Y2K."

"Y2K?" A puzzled look came to Kevin. The Range Rover sputtered, died, and barely turned over.

"I can push you over there." Gus pointed under a basketball hoop.

Kevin put the SUV into neutral. Gus pushed it across the warm asphalt onto a concrete pad. "Thanks," Kevin yelled back as he headed toward the private entrance. A few workers in the break-lunch room noticed Kevin as he leaped up the stairs two at a time.

Kevin hurried down the hallway past the conference room, turned right, and was relieved to see that the two walnut office doors were closed.

"Glad that you could make it in before noon, Mr. Vice President," Condi chided.

"The battery on the Range Rover was dead," Kevin answered between breaths.

"Why aren't you driving that high-performance car you got for graduation?" Condi asked.

"It's still up at Portland International Airport," Kevin replied.

Condi put her hands on Kevin's shoulder, twisted him one hundred and eighty degrees, and started pushing him back down the hallway. "Ms. Patty Kelly has been here for two hours. I gave her our employee handbook to review. I'm sure she finished that an hour ago. I asked her to answer calls up in the crow's nest."

Patty looked up from the small secretarial desk in the hall when she heard footsteps coming up the stairs. She stood and made sure the perfectly pressed white blouse got evenly tucked into the gray pleated business skirt. Then Ms. Kelly drew in a deep breath.

"Car trouble!" Condi offered as they approached.

"Sorry to keep you waiting, Patty." Kevin apologized. "The battery on the Range Rover is bad. I had to wait for Triple-A, and then I hit rush hour traffic."

"No worries, Mr. Trask. I appreciate this opportunity." Patty turned with a notepad in hand. "You got a call from the Warm Springs Federated Business Affairs. I wrote down the contact information. An agent called about an insurance bond. He said he would call back at eleven. Tina called three times. I made coffee."

"I'm glad Kevin hired you. The temps that we usually get are terrible," Condi said.

"Thank you, Ms. Johnson," Patty replied, withholding excitement. "Mr. Trask, should I get a new battery installed in your car?"

"That would be great," Kevin sighed in relief. "Call me Kevin, not Mr. Trask."

While Patty wrote on the notepad, the phone in the cubicle rang. "Trask Trailer, Vice President's office." Patty listened, then pressed the handset against her white blouse. "Kevin, it's Tina. It's the fourth time she has called."

"Put her through to the office phone," Kevin said, turned, and walked into the office.

Patty still had the handset to her chest. "Ms. Johnson, can you show me how to transfer the call?"

Condi leaned in, pushed the illuminated line button, and then tapped the hook twice. "You can hang up now."

Kevin pushed the blinking **Line 3** button. "Hello."

"Well, good morning, Mr. Vice President. Like, I already called you three times."

"I know. I had car problems this morning." Kevin stretched the coiled phone cord over to the one-way glass to look down at the plant workers.

"Like, that brand new convertible has a problem already?" Tina asked.

"No," Kevin quipped, with his attention focused on a group of workers idly talking. "I'm driving the Range Rover."

"Well, Mr. Vice President, the reason I called was to let you know that I canceled the trip with my parents to Mexico." Tina paused to add anticipation. "Now we can spend the weekend at the Beverly Wilshire and romp in the honeymoon suite, private whirlpool, or wherever our desire takes us."

"Tina, that sounds good, but after you told me that you had the Peter and Paul festival planned with your parents. I made plans to fly up to Portland and pick up the car."

"Oh, like, why is your car in Oregon?" Tina's voice turned to disappointment.

"It's a long story. But if Dad's not using the corporate jet, I'm planning to get that off my to-do list."

"Maybe I can go with you. We could join the Mile-High Club."

"Yeah, sure, Tina." Kevin was distracted by the lethargy and slowness in the plant. "Tina, I'll call you later." Kevin turned and noticed Patty in the doorway.

"Mr. Trask, could you let me know where you parked, and I will arrange for a new battery to get installed?"

"Come over here, I'll show you." Kevin hung up the phone, moved to the south-facing window, and pointed. "It's the black Range Rover under the basketball hoop. If Gus, the security guard, starts asking you a hundred questions, have him come up here to see me."

"He won't be a problem. I've worked with adults like Gus!" Patty replied

"You work with Autistic adults?" Kevin turned and looked directly into Patty's light brown eyes. There was something about Patty that Kevin liked; probably her directness, or maybe it was the way she stood up to the sheriffs at Shasta Lake.

"There are two Autistic adults in a bible study class that I'm taking with my grandmother," Patty replied, glancing away from Kevin's mesmerizing green eyes.

"I think Gus has read the bible more than once," Kevin replied

"Probably, he practically led me by hand across the parking lot, up the stairs to Condi's desk. He did mention how much he liked Jesus and superheroes."

"Patty, there is something I'd like you to do for Gus."

"Whatever you need. Gus touched my heart the moment we met."

"I don't know where you would even find one of those mirrors with long extension handles on it. Like border guards' use."

"Are you talking about the retrofit mirror with the broken wood handle that Gus inspects the underneath of incoming cars with?" Patty asked.

"Yes, you're reading my mind," Kevin answered.

"Not a problem." Patty jotted down Kevin's request on the yellow notepad.

"Patty, one last thing…" Kevin drew a deep breath. "Don't tell Gus that I bought the inspection mirror." Kevin paused again. "He'd be up here thanking me four or five times. I got so much work to do, I don't have time." Kevin pointed at the piles of documents and loose papers on the desk.

"I get it. Gus might not even accept the inspection mirror if it is the wrong color or a design he dislikes. He's wired differently. I got this covered." Patty insured Kevin.

For the following days, Kevin pored over papers, a union contract, and the land acquisition deed. He double-checked to see if the sixty-six million dollars was in Mr. Hung Meng's escrow account. Patty was a lifesaver from the first day. Whether it was getting a new battery installed or ensuring that the paperwork got recorded for the logging insurance bond, she was on top of it. On Thursday, everything seemed to be in order for the signing meeting. Kevin was having mixed feelings about the partial acquisition of Trask Trailer Inc.

Patty also had mixed feelings about Kevin's intentions. She couldn't tell if he wanted to take the money and run—or if he was having second thoughts about the Hung Meng acquisition. She lightly joked about the President of the United States saying he didn't have sex with that woman and immediately regretted it. She wished she could take it back, including what happened on the houseboats at Shasta Lake. The insistence that Kevin wouldn't let her call him Mr. Trask or Mr. Vice President was another issue, but in a few days, it wouldn't matter.

On the drive in on Friday morning, Kevin had somewhat concluded that selling the manufacturing plant and outsourcing most of the work was the best option for the Trask family. The workforce clause, which guaranteed employment for some workers until the year 2000, seemed reasonable. The two-year window for new skills training and job placement assistance was more than fair during the downsizing period. Kevin drew in a deep sigh of relief as he pulled the Range Rover up to the guard shack. *Thank you, God, that taking over the family business is not in the cards.*

Gus immediately emerged from the small building with a new inspection mirror that had wheels and a light. He methodically checked under the Range Rover. "You are super clear today. No bombs or trackers, Mr. Kevin Trask."

"Gus, it looks like you got a new inspection mirror." Kevin acted surprised.

"Yes, Sir," Gus pushed the retractable handle inward. "This is the Y2K inspector model. It is the same model that the border guards use."

"That's pretty cool. Where did you get it?" Kevin knew the answer.

"Ms. Kelly. She knows someone who loans them out to security people who have advanced Y2K knowledge," Gus whispered to make sure no one else heard.

"Ms. Kelly, she's a Y2K agent too?" Kevin asked quietly, playing along and also because he wasn't exactly sure.

"Ms. Patty Kelly, the temp worker who started on Tuesday. She rides the bus from Inglewood to LAX, transfers, and arrives at the bus stop at 6:23 am every morning. I have her name on the sign-in sheet for Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, and today if you need to talk with her."

"No, that's good. I didn't know Patty's last name."

"Oh no! The bad men are coming!" Gus locked onto the black limo coming down Navy Way Road. When the left blinker flashed, Gus froze.

Kevin knew who was behind the blacked-out privacy windows. He moved the Range Rover under the basketball hoop and hurried back toward the guard shack. The limo accelerated! Gus couldn't move to close the security gate. Kevin jumped in front of the limo and held his hand up. The limo skidded to a stop. Kevin moved to the driver's window and tapped on the glass.

The sound of an electric motor hummed as the window lowered. "Get out of the way!" The driver ordered from behind a pair of dark sunglasses.

"I hope that you weren't trying to come into Trask Manufacturing without going through an inspection and obtaining a parking pass!" Kevin asked loudly.

"This car got inspected on Monday," the limo driver yelled. "Who are you to stop us? Do you know who my passengers are?"

"Do you know that I'm the Vice President of Trask Inc? My family owns this property. I can detain any car for security reasons. So, if you don't want to get arrested for trespassing, I would suggest that you back up and let my guard do his job!"

The privacy panel behind the driver's head lowered about an inch, and a few words in Chinese were exchanged. The driver put the car in reverse.

"Gus, do an extra thorough inspection. If anyone touches your new United States-issued Y2K inspection mirror, call Patty, and she'll call the FBI."

The limo backed up as Kevin jogged across the parking lot toward the executive entrance. *At least I got to flex the Trask name once, although I'll only be Vice President until next week.*

"Good morning," Patty said as Kevin summited the stairs.

"Good morning, Ms. Patty Kelly," Kevin replied with a wink. "Nice job finding that official United States Y2K inspection mirror for Gus." Patty was perplexed by the formality of her name.

"No problem," She removed a small yellow piece of paper stuck to the desk lamp. "Mr. Bull Whitefoot called first thing this morning and wanted you to call him ASAP. He is at the Confederated Tribes headquarters and said not to sign anything until he talks with you."

"Didn't I already sign the insurance bond and paperwork for the Oregon Licensing Division on Wednesday?" Kevin asked while moving toward Patty, who was holding a yellow Post-it with the phone number on it.

"Yes, and I faxed all the paperwork late that evening before going home." Kevin snapped the small yellow paper from Patty's finger and went into his office. *I'll be glad when this week is over.*

Kevin dialed the number and got put on hold. *Click* came through the handset, followed by Bull's concerned voice. "Kevin, you didn't sign any of the documents yet, did you?"

"Yes, we did. My secretary faxed everything late Wednesday evening. Didn't your people tell you?" Kevin asked in a somewhat agitated tone. "Friday morning is a little late to shoot back a warning signal."

"Kevin, remember you faxed me some land deal acquisition papers with a Chinese company? After the elders and I completed the White Pigeon Logging documents, we reviewed the Trask property sale and identified some significant issues. If any group knows about getting taken on a land deal, it would be us Native Americans."

"Bull, we're signing that paperwork this next Monday." Kevin breathed a sigh of relief. "The good news is that after Monday, I'll be done and plan to retrieve Billy's crampon on Mt. Hood."

"Good. Ken Saxton has already started delivering firewood to the casino. Ms. Kelly got everything in order. She was right on top of everything."

"Yes, she's been a big help." Kevin leaned back in the office chair.

"Kevin, none of the tribe elders think that you should sign the land sale contract on the Trask Property." Bull said in a somber, firm tone.

"I'm listening." Kevin's mind was already made up, but he showed Bull the respect of listening. The Tribe Elders had spent time reading over the documents and owed them respect, too.

"Kevin, if you read deep into all the legal jargon and all the performance conditions that have to happen by the year 2000." Bull paused to find some of the highlights the elders had made. "If production and sales growth are not met, your family could lose everything."

"Bull, but by outsourcing more of the work, we reduce the cost per unit and will be more competitive and grow our sales force," Kevin replied with confidence. "Plus, we have a generous two-year time frame to reduce the workforce in our Long Beach plant that has been draining our return on investment."

"Okay, but let me ask you this…" Bull paused and drew in a deep breath. "Doesn't Trask Trailers have sales and rental lots all over the United States?"

"Yes, we do. I believe we have almost eight hundred different locations."

"Okay, then answer me this." Bull paused. "Are any of those off-site locations getting purchased by Hung Meng?"

Kevin leaned back in the chair and looked at the piles of documents on his desk. "Bull, most of the remote sites are franchised. I'm sure they'll be offered something."

"Then you should find out why there is no mention of that." Bull replied with ten times the concern of what Kevin showed.

"Bull, I do appreciate the call. I'm glad that your casino guests will have firewood for this winter." Kevin wanted to change the subject. He had no plans to look back through the piles of paperwork in front of him.

"Kevin, that land sale contract is not good. It looks like some hard-working people might get screwed." Bull warned and then abruptly hung up.

Kevin got up from the desk and walked to the window overlooking the parking lot. He watched Gus inspect one of the delivery trucks coming into Trask Inc. His gaze extended into the busy Long Beach Harbor—more stuff being moved. Kevin didn't want anything to do with the nonstop world of materialism and the never-ending side hustle.

The sound of Patty's high heels gave her away. "I brought you a cup of coffee, one cream, and one sugar." Patty was as efficient with words as she was with multitasking.

"Just put it on my desk." Kevin turned to gaze back out the window. "Patty, thanks for getting all the paperwork up to Oregon. The logging operation started work yesterday."

"No problem, Mr. Trask. I put everything in a folder and included the tax forms you'll need. I wasn't sure if you wanted to

use July or the end of December for the fiscal year for your accounting period."

"I'll run that by our accountants," Kevin replied, "The main thing is the Saxtons have work."

"Self-worth and employment go hand in hand." Patty offered an idiom.

Kevin returned to the desk and plopped behind all the paperwork. "You have been a big help this week. I'll make sure that Condi cuts a check for you, and I don't want to be disturbed."

"Thank you," Patty replied in a downcast tone. She returned to the small desk in the hallway and spent the next couple of hours ensuring everything was filed and easily accessible. Kevin's calendar had only one appointment the following week: the sign-off with Hung Meng on Monday morning.

The sound of footsteps coming up the stairs got Patty's attention. "Is Kevin in the office?"

"Ah… he asked not to be disturbed." Patty stood.

"Oh!" Robert Trask took Patty's hand. "You're an attractive young thing."

"Thank you." They shook hands. "I came on board this Tuesday to help Kevin wrap up a few things."

"Did Condi find you at the Temp agency we use?"

"No, sir, your son and I have some history. Kevin called me on Monday, and…" Patty's explanation was interrupted when Kevin came out of the office door.

"Dad, I want you to look over something before the Monday meeting!" Kevin said in a keyed-up voice.

Robert followed Kevin into the top-floor office. "Small changes can be taken care of on Monday morning. Our lawyers will be here early before the meeting and…"

"This is not a small change!" Kevin held up a fistful of papers. "This land sale contract is only for the Long Beach manufacturing plant. We will be left hanging in the wind for the eight hundred sales and service sites! Plus, there are performance clauses that could shift any debt to the Trask Family Trust in less than two years."

"Kevin, just hang on!" Robert closed the door.

Ten minutes after the quitting whistle blew, Robert Trask busted out of Kevin's office. He was late for a golf lesson. Patty was shoving the chair under the small desk when Condi came up the stairs with a bi-fold perforated piece of paper. She handed Patty a paycheck for her four days of work.

Kevin came out of the office looking as though he was about to collapse. After just one week as VP, he was ready to leave the corporate world behind for the big shots. "How about you two joining me for a drink?"

Condi looked at Patty and smiled. In four short days, the two women had shared things about each other that no one else knew. "Sure, Kevin, where would you like to go?"

"How about that small Mexican lunch place on Navy Way Road that overlooks the harbor?" Kevin pulled the office door shut, which had the name **Richard Johnson** embossed on a brass metal plate. "I heard they make a great Margareta there."

"Ah… I'll have to pass," Patty wasn't sure of the Long Beach to Inglewood bus schedule after 6:00 pm.

Condi knew about Patty's DUI and had to use public transportation. "I'll give you a ride."

Kevin also knew that Patty was taking a bus down from Inglewood and that it would drop her off at 6:32 am, because Gus had relayed the information to him several times. Gus knew how long and how many stops there were on that bus route, but didn't know why Patty couldn't drive. Gus only shared what he knew was true.

Kevin found a small table on the deck, about twenty yards back from where Navy Way Road took a long, sweeping turn toward a container shipyard. Truck traffic was minimal after 5:00 p.m. on the terminal peninsula, especially on a Friday. Even the Mexican restaurant was empty. There were a few Longshoremen shooting pool inside, and three bikers at the bar. Kevin poured a second Margarita and watched the Seagulls rise on the ocean breeze, then dive into the harbor for anything edible, including garbage.

Finally, Condi and Patty appeared from the patio door and sashayed toward Kevin. Every eye in the bar watched the two professional women sit down with class and style that rarely graced the working section of Long Beach Harbor. Kevin signaled for another pitcher of margarita. He poured his third large glass of tequila, triple sec with lime, and wasn't being bashful and now demanding that Condi give up her father's home address. Condi told Kevin that he needed to stay out of her family's business. After Kevin informed Condi that he wanted to return some private items that he had come across, Condi relented.

Patty barely sipped at her margarita and listened intently as Kevin explained how he gave up his Gonzaga basketball scholarship to play his sophomore year at Duke. Condi shared that she was already looking at a few dot-com businesses popping up across Silicon Valley. She explained that she had to be proactive during the downsizing, especially with raising a six-year-old as a single mom.

No matter how much Kevin drank and how smoothly Condi tried to be informative, the fact that all Trask Trailers eventually would get built overseas didn't faze Kevin. She spoke her peace and

shared about the Johnson family's problems after the death of her brother, Jabar.

There were plenty of skeletons in the Kelly family closet that Patty could have shared, but she stayed quiet. She had only known Condi for four days and Kevin through friends. She had known Kevin since he started dating Tina, but the first time they had a conversation was when they slept on the top deck of the Stargazer at Shasta Lake.

Condi finished her margarita, looked at her watch, and said. "We need to go; it's Ali's dinner time."

"Okay, Condi," Kevin hiccupped. "I can give Patty a ride; I know how to get up to Englewood up by LAX." Kevin hiccupped again. "I can always use that new hi-tech GPS phone unit in my fancy concept car."

"Kevin, your fancy sports car is still sitting up at the Portland airport," Condi replied with a scowled expression.

"Oh yeah, I forgot." Kevin let out a juvenile laugh and then rubbed his head.

"You're driving a Range Rover, Mr. Trask," Patty added.

"I asked you, Ms. Kelly, to call me Kevin, not Mr. Trask. Or call me Kev like you did up at Lake Mead?" Kevin slurred.

"That was Shasta Lake, Kevin. And yes, I will call you Kev if you let me drive that fancy Range Rover. I have never driven anything that cool."

"Okie dookie," Kevin replied, holding up the keys. "You can drive the cool concept car with the bad-ass twelve-speaker sound system, with retractable rollbar."

Without the slightest hesitation, Patty snatched the keys from Kevin's fingers. "You got a deal. I get to drive, and I'll call you Kev."

Condi winked and gave the thumbs up to Patty over the top of Kevin's head. "I've got to go pick up Ali. Gus said he could watch him for an hour."

"Gus Watt is watching your baby." Kevin looked up from pouring the rest of the margarita mix into his empty glass. "I wonder if I can get salt for the rim of my glass?" Looking side to side made Kevin's head feel like the waves sloshing against the jetty in Long Beach Harbor.

"You want another pitcher?" Kevin asked Patty.

"No, not really, Kev," Patty replied.

"Well then… I guess it's time we go for a spin in my fancy sports car." Kevin stood and had to steady himself against the table; he pulled some bills out of his pocket and tossed them onto the table. "Do you think that will cover the two pitchers?"

"Yes, that's plenty of money." Patty bent over and then raised under Kevin's arm to steady him off the deck and into the parking

lot. She helped him to the passenger-side door, and Kevin crawled up into the Range Rover. It had been almost a year since Patty had driven; she moved the seat forward, adjusted the mirrors, and then started the engine. She made sure the left blinker was on and slowly headed north on Navy Way Road. Instead of taking the Seaside Freeway, she took New Dock Street, hoping to avoid any traffic cops. The back roads would take longer, but were a safer choice. Kevin didn't know the difference; he had reclined the passenger seat and was singing along to the radio.

The trip up to Inglewood gave Patty time to work on several different plans. She put plan one to the test. "Kevin, why don't you spend the night with me tonight? You might have had just a tad bit too much to drink."

Kevin un-reclined the passenger seat and then wiped drool off his chin. "Nah… Tonight doesn't feel right. Don't get me wrong, Patty. I think you're hot and have a smoking body. But I told my dad that we'd needed to talk first thing in the morning out by the fricken skinny-dipping pool." Kevin reclined the seat again.

"Skinny-dipping pool?" Patty knew all too much about drunk talk combined with dirty talk, but this was Kevin Trask. He hardly swore, let alone was crude. "Skinny-dipping, what's that all about?"

"The backyard pool that grandpa Trask caught Maria and me in." Kevin took a labored, long breath. "We were naked. I was only fourteen. She was nineteen."

"Ah, okay." Plan one wasn't going to work. Patty put on the right blinker and turned into a small diner parking lot. "Remember, you said that you would feed me if I drove."

"I did?" Kevin sat up in the seat just as Patty shut off the Range Rover. "That sounds good. I could go for some steak and eggs." Kevin tucked in his shirt and almost stumbled over a parking bumper in the parking lot. Patty grabbed him by the arm and then held the diner door open for him.

Five cups of coffee, steak, eggs, pancakes, and hashbrowns, plus three trips to the restroom, and Kevin was on the mend.

It was past midnight when a cell phone rang. "Excuse me, this is probably my grandma checking on my whereabouts." Patty dug into her purse and pulled out a dark grey cell phone with an antenna. "Hello."

Kevin motioned to the waitress to bring the check, and he could hear yelling over the phone. "Kevin, the call is for you. It's Tina."

Kevin took the phone, "What the hell are you doing out with that bitch?"

"Tina, calm down. We worked late tonight. I gave Patty a ride home so that she wouldn't have to ride the bus." Kevin looked across the table, gave Patty a cunning wink, and then took the phone outside.

Five minutes later, Kevin returned. "Sorry about that. Tina's mad because she was planning a trip to Mexico and…"

"Kevin, you don't owe me an explanation. If nothing more, that call sobered you up." Patty slid out of the booth, and her skirt hiked up to the middle of her firm, tanned thighs. "I'll drive to my house. Remember, you're welcome to spend the night."

"I wouldn't want to explain that sleepover to Tina." Kevin winked at Patty.

Patty pulled to the curb in front of the three-bedroom, single-car-garage track home; she put the Range Rover in Park and set the brake, then looked over. "Kevin, it was great working this past week. I learned a lot. Thanks for the opportunity."

Patty's words snapped Kevin out of his caffeine trance. "Sorry about that call from Tina. We have some relationship problems we need to work out."

"I get it, Kevin. Thanks again for the work experience; it will look good on my resume." Patty opened the driver's door.

"So, I'll see you Monday morning." Kevin opened the passenger door.

"Ah… Yeah!" Patty's heart jumped with the unexpected work request. When they crossed paths at the hood of the Range Rover, Patty lifted on her toes and pecked Kevin on the cheek. "I'll see you bright and early Monday morning." Patty would have skipped up the walkway if it weren't for her high heels.

Across the hood, Kevin yelled, "Thanks for sobering me up and listening to my relationship issue and my grandpa."

Patty waved one last time, went through the front door, kicked off her shoes, and leaned back against the door. With her eyes closed and her head pointed upward, she quietly said, "Thank You, God, for another week of work."

Chap 13—————Drunk Driving

The beeping alarm blasted throughout the room and into Kevin's skull. The roof of his mouth felt like a dried-up leather tennis shoe. Kevin hit the snooze button and then pulled the sheet up over his head. The second time the alarm blasted, he rolled out of bed and made it into the shower. The hot water helped, but even the most experienced college frat drinkers couldn't wash off two pitchers of Margarita. Bending over to tie his running shoes sent the chicken-fried steak and eggs breakfast back up into Kevin's throat. Outside on the landing, the fresh morning air helped clear out the brain fog. Kevin used the railing to clamber down the outside stairs. He jogged toward the pool.

"What time did you get home last night?" Robert asked as Kevin approached the white patio table.

"I don't think it was too late, maybe eleven or so," Kevin answered while looking over the top of his dad's head at light blue water in the swimming pool.

"When are you going to get the Mercedes back?" Robert asked, stalling about the real reason for the breakfast meeting.

"I'm thinking about having our pilot fly me up to Portland this afternoon, maybe spend the night, and drive back Sunday," Kevin answered while slowly inhaling cool morning air. "If I don't get feeling better," Kevin inhaled some more fresh air, "I will have Patty drive it back next week."

"She is the temp that I met on Friday. The one with an Irish last name?" Robert continued to avoid what he needed to discuss with Kevin. "Is she a good driver?"

"Yeah, she drove the Range Rover last night." Kevin paused and thought about how carefully Patty drove on all the side streets.

"She's a cautious driver, always uses turn signals, and comes to a full stop at all the stop signs."

"Were you too intoxicated to drive?" Robert Trask looked up into Kevin's bloodshot eyes.

"Yes, that's why Patty drove until I got food in my stomach and drank a bunch of coffee."

"That was a smart move! There is never a good reason for driving drunk." Robert Trask stood and looked sternly at Kevin. "Another smart move you made yesterday was finding those clauses in the acquisition contract. I think you might have prevented our family from possibly losing everything." Robert Trask dropped the newspaper on the patio table and then headed back toward the Trask mansion without saying another word.

Kevin's hungover slump turned to a rigid, standing-tall, motionless stance! A thank you from Robert would have been great, but just the acknowledgment that he had done two things right was enough. He slipped off his shoes and shirt at the edge of the pool. *A swim will be better than a run.*

Kevin took the stairs on the side of the six-car garage, two at a time. While rinsing off chlorine, he thought back to a couple of weeks ago when Tina was in the shower with him. *Tina is flawless from head to toe. We need some alone time. I'll give her a call to see if she wants to fly up to Portland and spend the night in a five-star hotel.*

Kevin sat on the bed, wrapped only in a towel around his waist, and dialed. "Hello," A male voice came over the handset.

"Is Tina there?" Kevin asked.

"No, she went down to Mexico to do the *Peter* and Paul celebration thing."

"I thought she was doing that with you and her mom."

"No way," Tom replied, "Nancy and I haven't been over the border for over fifteen years."

"Oh, I was sure that she said she was going with the two of you."

"This is Kevin Trask, isn't it?" Tina's stepfather asked.

"Yes, Tom, it's me," Kevin answered, somewhat confused.

"We thought she was going to Tijuana with you," Tom replied with a worried tone. "Tina mentioned a Duke Basketball player and doing a *Peter* and Paul *Fiesta Party. She said not to worry and that it was the Mexicans' version of St. Patrick's Day."*

"I wanted to see if she wanted to fly up to Portland and get my car parked at the airport," Kevin replied.

"Hold on for a second." Tom put the handset down. About thirty seconds later, he picked it back up. "Tina will be back late Sunday night or Monday morning. That's all I know. Thanks for calling." *Click,* the line went dead.

Kevin hung up the phone and lay back on the bed. The earlier feeling of affirmation and praise from Robert Trask got wiped out by the diminutive conversation with Tina's stepdad. The fact that she lied about who she was going to Tijuana with piled onto Kevin's hungover head.

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The trip over the Mexican border wasn't for a celebration or a fiesta; it was to resupply his stock of Rohypnol. Tim was okay with Tina's telling him that there would be no sex and that she still had feelings for Kevin. She even suggested that Tim might try to contact Sue to see how the pregnancy was going. Listening to Tina blab about how Kevin had finally taken the VP position only made Tim more determined—Tina would be his new trophy.

The solemnity of Saint Peter and Saint Paul was the furthest thought from Tim's mind. No sooner had they checked into their motel room than he suggested that Tina get some sun by the pool while he went for supplies. A twenty-dollar cab ride, a few sharp turns down a dirt alley, and Tim had the bogus prescription filled. Most men would never go where Tim went, but at six feet four and almost two hundred thirty pounds, he was intimidating. The deep-set black eyes, set under a thick brow, were equally intimidating. Tim was known as the enforcer on the basketball court and was preparing to earn the same reputation back in the motel room.

The thirty-hour period from Saturday afternoon to Sunday evening was one that Tina would barely recall and could never testify to. The bright yellow truck pulled up in front of her parents' home. Tim lumbered up to the door to get help. The explanation that Tina was weak from something she had eaten or drunk in Mexico sounded plausible. Tom helped her undress and get into bed. Drugged, intoxicated, or ill, Tina was still beautiful. Her body was as perfect as any playmate centerfold. Tom lusted for the longest time.

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Kevin never made it up to Oregon to pick up the concept Mercedes. Instead, he went to work and studied the land sale contract and acquisition paperwork more closely. In the fine details, the so-called joint merger was increasingly resembling a hostile takeover.

Gus was the only other person at the Trask manufacturing plant, and Kevin observed him walking down Navy Way Road to the ocean and back several times. The back-and-forth was part of Gus's weekend routine, along with going to the Laundromat,

grocery shopping, and, most importantly, attending church. Gus's one-room apartment on the west end of the manufacturing plant would have to go. The thirty-day eviction clause was included in the paperwork and ready to be signed.

Monday morning, Kevin prepared for the signing meeting by dressing like a vice president in tan dress slacks, an open-collar blue silk dress shirt, and a corresponding brown leather belt and shoes. What Kevin didn't prepare for was the dreadful Monday morning traffic on the 405. It was almost nine o'clock when Gus saw the distressed look on Kevin's face as he whirled the Range Rover into the parking lot. Gus immediately raised the guard rail and nodded at Kevin as the Range Rover blasted by the guard shack and skidded to a stop under the basketball hoop.

When Kevin rounded the top stair to his office, Patty jumped to attention. "Here you go; I organized all the yellow-highlighted papers in the red folder! The land-sale contract is in the blue folder, and the…"

Kevin snatched the colored folders and said, "Grab a notepad. You're coming with me." Kevin turned and headed back down the stairs, waiting for Patty to catch up.

The sound of Kevin's clicking brown Italian leather oxfords was in unison with Patty's new high-heels as they approached the open double doors to the conference room. Condi was pouring the last cup of coffee when she looked up and took a double-take. Kevin looked like a model for Business Week magazine, and it was evident that Patty had spent her first paycheck on a new outfit. Condi was relieved that Kevin arrived within the acceptable start time for the meeting. Patty, at his side, with paper and pad, gave him an intimidating, ominous look.

"Well, let's get at this," Robert Track said as he took his seat at the end of the long conference table. "Kevin, why don't you start with your concerns?"

"Ah… Just one second, the freeway was jammed this morning." Kevin stood at the far end of the conference table opposite Robert Trask. Patty quickly sat down and slid the first contract page with yellow-highlighted bullet points.

"Thanks." Kevin studied the paper and then said, "Gentlemen, before we get started, I'd like you all to meet my assistant, Ms. Patty Kelly."

Patty stood, smoothed out her skirt, and confidently walked to the end of the table. Myung Chan stood and shook her hand. Mr. Hung Meng looked up, didn't stand, and wouldn't shake her hand. The two Chinese attorneys would not shake her hand either; they remained seated and gave a nod toward Hung Meng. Vincent Eager, a Trask attorney, stood and introduced himself, then shook Patty's hand; his understudy followed suit.

Condi moved away from the serving cart, walked to Patty, gave her a light hug, and whispered, "Thanks for driving Kevin home Friday night."

"Thanks for inviting me out for a drink. It made me feel like part of your team." Patty walked back and took a seat on Kevin's left.

The conference table had Robert Trask on one end and Kevin Trask on the other, separated by twenty feet. On Robert Trask's right sat Hung Meng, Myung Chan, and the two Chinese attorneys. Directly across from those four sat Condi, Vincent Eager, and his understudy, who specialized in Trusts and probate law. It was an unfair match, two on one end of the conference table and eight on the other.

Robert stood and said, "Gentlemen, it looks like we can start signing and notarizing if no one has any objections."

Kevin slowly raised his hand. "I have a concern with the land sale contract." Patty slid a highlighted page to him. "Granted, the offer to purchase this Long Beach commercial property is fair, but we have over eight hundred other properties located all over the United States. Are any of those properties included in the acquisition?"

There was a long pause before an intense conversation in Chinese erupted. That conversation went on for at least five minutes. Patty was actively short-handing notes and stopped to slide a second paper to Kevin.

"Another concern is the outsourcing." Kevin read off the first bullet point and stopped. It felt like an elephant had entered the room. "Also, there is no guarantee that any of the manufacturing will remain here in the United States. Hung Meng imports could build complete trailers in China if they choose to."

Now, a heated conversation between Robert Trask and his attorneys erupted. He wanted to know if what Kevin had just pointed out was true. The understudy was flipping through his copy in pretend mode. He knew Kevin was correct. Mr. Hung Meng had paid off his college loans after certain conditions were replaced with double-talk legal jargon.

Patty circled something on her copy of the contract and handed it to Kevin. Then went back to jotting down conversation bullet points.

Kevin almost had to yell to be heard. "Another concern is the performance clause on page eight of the proposed merger. If projected trailer sales don't hit double-digit increases by the year two thousand, the Trask Trust could not only lose everything…" Kevin took a deep breath. "The Trask family would be liable for contracts not fulfilled."

Robert Trask exploded out of his chair. He grabbed Vincent Eager by the arm and pulled him out of the conference room. From the other side of the table, a firestorm of Chinese dialogue was being exchanged. At the farthest end, Patty was writing on her yellow notepad as rapidly as the four men were quarreling.

Throughout all the years Condi had worked for Robert Trask, there had never been a meeting like this. The four Asian men were at each other like mad dogs! Out in the hall, Robert was demanding answers from his longtime lawyer and friend. She went to the back of the room and poured a glass of water. While Patty was still taking notes, Kevin walked over to Condi. "I have another bullet point I want to discuss. It could affect your family."

"What?" Patty glared at Kevin. "I told you to keep my dad out of this!"

The Chinese screaming match ceased when Robert Trask busted back through the double doors. Vincent Eger was two steps behind; they took their seats at the conference table again. "Is there anything else, Kevin?" Robert asked solidly.

It was now so silent in the conference room that the sounds of manufacturing from the farthest reaches of the plant could be heard. Kevin picked up the contract. "On page seventy-one, item 4, sub-item B." Kevin waited for everyone to turn to the specified page in their copies. "The no-on-site apartment clause needs to be removed."

Robert Trask zeroed in on the sub-item B. It was now clear that this clause was intended to be hidden. Only one Trask attorney was stunned that Kevin had delved so deeply into all the Legal jargon.

Kevin continued, "Grandpa Trask had sub-item B in his will indirectly. He wanted Gus Watt to have a place at the Trask manufacturing plant." Kevin took a deep breath. "Grandpa's wish specifically included an on-site apartment for as long as Gus Watt wanted."

The Chinese fireworks started all over again. Both Kevin and Robert Trask were surprised at such a violent reaction from Hung Meng. Gus was harmless, and although his repeated, ritualistic pattern from autism could be an annoyance, he was an excellent security guard and was barely being paid minimum wage.

Kevin sat down as Mr. Meng berated his side of the table in Chinese. It was worse than what some college coaches do to players when their team is losing. Patty Kelly didn't look up from her yellow notepad. Condi concluded that she would not be passing out new blue ink pens for a contract signing.

Robert Trask stood; his red face reflected an elevated blood pressure. "This meeting is over!"

Condi followed Robert Trask out of the conference room. Mr. Hung Meng continued his ranting in Chinese. The two Asian

attorneys put all the documents into their briefcases and lined up behind Mr. Meng, then marched out of the room. Myung Chan gave Kevin a look that could have killed a lion and fell in line behind the trio.

Next, Kevin looked over at Patty and asked. "What are all those notes that you have been writing down?"

Patty looked up and answered, "My grandmother is Chinese. I'm not fluent in the language, but I wrote down most of the important stuff."

When the understudy attorney overheard Patty Kelly say to Kevin that she had written down Mr. Hung Meng's conversation, he exited the conference room in a panic!

Vincent Eager, the longtime attorney for the Trask Trust, approached Kevin and shook his hand. "Your Grandfather would be proud of you. I remember how emphatic he was that Gus would always have a place to live."

Only Kevin and Patty were in the conference room. "This meeting didn't go as expected," Kevin said,

"Kevin, this is not a merger; it sounded more like an underhanded takeover to me." Patty realized that she was saying too much for someone who had only been on the job for just over a week.

"We'll see," Kevin replied. "Hopefully, Dad and I will change a few line items, and this can become a done deal. Then I can head back to Oregon." Kevin pushed back in the chair. "I think I'll go have a couple of margaritas for lunch." Kevin joked, then winked.

"Okay, when you get back, I should have my notes and the bullet points from the meeting on your desk," Patty replied, much more serious than Kevin.

Kevin went down the stairs and out a heavy metal fire door at the NW corner. The back of the building looked like a junkyard. There were used Trask Trailers, stacks of rusty old wheels on rotted rubber tires, and piles of metal. As a child, the junkyard area was where he played, built forts, and escaped into a young boy's world of make-believe. Old rusty trailer carcasses became forts, hideouts, and places where monsters might hide. Kevin spent about forty-five minutes reliving his backyard explorations.

The west side of the building yielded a more sanitized look; the one-hundred-foot-by-forty-foot cinder block wall had only two windows and two doors. Thirty feet up was a window into the crow's nest that overlooked the Long Beach inlet. A smaller window at ground level was next to the door to Gus's apartment. Twenty feet south of the apartment door was a heavy steel roll-up door. Behind that oversized metal door was a thirty-foot round cesspool pit that filled and lowered with salt water according to the tide's

ebb and flow. Kevin had only been in that damp, musty room a couple of times.

Grandpa Trask had the walls and ceiling sealed off with moisture-proof material. He made sure the wall between Gus's apartment was double-sealed, ensuring that Gus's small apartment was mold-free. There were old stories about Frogmen drowning in the thirty-foot open pit of seawater—and it wasn't by accident.

Kevin walked over to the small window into Gus's apartment and peered through the glass. The room was about the same size as the crow's nest office. The six navy hammocks that Kevin swung and took naps in as a boy were still mounted on the back wall. The roll of equipment lockers in front of four gym-type tiled showers still had locks hanging from their latches. There was a small counter with a microwave and a hotplate next to a small refrigerator. In the center of the room was a folding table and two chairs; next to them was what appeared to be a kneeler, similar to those found in a funeral home or a confessional booth. *Maybe it's time for Gus to move to one of the new condos over in Torrance.*

When Kevin backed away, he took note of a bright red, motorized kid's car. There was also a swing set and jungle gym under a temporary nylon shed that seemed out of place, especially since Gus was almost six feet. Kevin jogged toward the front corner of the building and made a beeline for the guard shack.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Kevin Trask. I hope you got to the meeting on time. It was 9:02 am when I saw you turning in. That is why I raised the gate and let you go through without having a permanent parking pass. I hope that I didn't violate any security rules." Gus spoke rapidly and nervously.

"No, Gus, I'm glad you let me through. I'm going to stick the permanent parking pass on my sports car when I get it back." Kevin replied. "You did everything by the book."

"I'm glad, Mr. Kevin Trask," Gus said with a more relaxed voice. "I got afraid when I saw you jogging toward me. I always inspect every car and truck without a permanent stick-on pass."

"Gus, you did the right thing," Kevin reassured Gus.

"Thank you, Mr. Kevin Trask. My stomach feels better now." Gus replied.

Kevin paused, knowing he needed to be careful with how he asked the following question. "Gus, what would you think about moving to one of those brand-new Condominiums with a view of Long Beach harbor?"

"You mean move out of the Amphibious Scouts and Raiders training room? I couldn't do that. Some superheroes are expecting me to keep guard on the tunnel that Iron Man made with Captain America. They used the Repulsar drill to cut the underground tunnel to saltwater." Gus pointed south down Navy Way Road.

"Gus, we could get you a condominium high up that will overlook the entire port, just like I can from my office. You would be an important lookout. I could even set up a big telescope for you to watch cargo ships and tankers waiting to come into the United States."

"The bad men will enter by the underwater tunnel. A telescope wouldn't work unless I had Superman's eyes." Gus replied and then started to sway back and forth. "No, Mr. Kevin Trask, it wouldn't be good for me to move."

Kevin had planted the seed and knew not to push. "Gus, I'm going to jog down Navy Way Road. When I come back, we'll talk about a new place where you can look out over the whole Long Beach Port with a big telescope."

"No, Mr. Kevin Trask, it wouldn't be good for me to move…" Gus replied again, now methodically rocking forward and then backward. "No, Mr. Kevin Trask, it wouldn't be good for me to move…" Gus had his eyes closed. "No, Mr. Kevin Trask, it wouldn't be good for me to move…"

The two-mile Navy Way Road was on top of a man-made jetty. Kevin looked back a few times, and Gus had not moved from his spot just outside the small security guard station. Kevin made it almost a mile when he turned around for the second time. Gus was in the same spot, rocking back and forth. "Crap!" Kevin started sprinting back toward the Trask parking lot.

The lunch whistle didn't even break Gus's fixated state. Sweaty and somewhat out of breath, Kevin approached and yelled. "Gus, don't worry about moving. We'll figure something out."

Gus immediately opened his eyes and quit rocking in place. "Thank you! Mr. Kevin Trask. Thank you!"

Kevin knew better than to say anything more about moving. "Gus, I need that parking pass that I didn't get this morning."

"Oh yeah. I'll get it." Gus snapped back to real-time and went into the guard shack. Today was the third time Kevin had parked the Range Rover under the basketball hoop. The first day, he didn't park under it; Gus helped push the Range Rover there because of a dead battery. The second time was when a truck delivering metal was blocking the entrance to the executives' parking area. This morning, he got delayed by traffic, and it was the closest place for him to access the conference room via the employee entrance.

Kevin was sticking the parking pass on the windshield when men and women were coming out of the plant and started sitting on the edge of the shipping dock with their lunch pails or brown paper sacks. One athletic-looking black worker emerged from a bay door, bouncing a basketball. He jumped down from the four-foot-high loading dock and motioned for Kevin to move. Kevin looked in the rearview mirror and backed out. He dropped the SUV

into drive and headed for the exit. Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed the worker place his left hand under his right elbow and then gave the Up Yours gesture.

With the no-go signing meeting and Gus having an adverse reaction to moving, Kevin wasn't going to put up with any more crap. He stomped on the brake and slammed the Range Rover into reverse; road rage was at 110 percent.

The provoking worker took a stance. Kevin jumped out of the driver's door! Before he took two steps, the basketball got rocketed at his face. Kevin caught the basketball and fired it back with more force! Everyone on the dock saw that a confrontation was coming—CP was not someone to go up against.

"What's your problem?" Kevin yelled

"Yo, whiteboy, why don't you learn to park your ride in a parking space like everyone else," CP yelled back. "This is the third time us bros haven't been able to shoot hoops because you parked your Rat Rover in our territory." CP's two-handed chest passed the basketball at Kevin's face again.

It felt good to feel the basketball in his hands for the first time since the college playoffs. Kevin dribbled three times and took a jump shot. The ball swished through the net.

"Lucky shot whiteboy!" CP ran to the basketball, dribbled in front of Kevin, and hooked a shot. The ball bounced off the rim and to the ground.

Kevin ran to the ball, dribbled it a few times, and made a lay-up. "You want to play some one-on-one?"

"You can't play in those fancy leather shoes and dress slacks."

"Don't worry about my shoes. Let's play to seven." Kevin insisted.

"Okay. But don't blame the whooping that I give you on those shoes." CP accepted the challenge. He dribbled the ball to the top of the key, pulled up, and shot. The ball swished through the net!

Now, it was Kevin's ball. He dribbled past CP, beelined to the basket for an easy lay-up. CP's next shot was short and bounced high off the rim. Kevin rebounded, circled the top of the key, and beelined for another lay-up. "That's two to one!" Kevin bounced the ball to CP.

Additional workers gathered to watch. Now, it was five to two in Kevin's favor. "Two more points, and I win." Kevin boasted.

"I thought you said play to eleven," CP replied.

"No, seven," Kevin snapped back. "The lunch whistle will blow before we can get to eleven. I don't need something else that ends in limbo."

"What do you mean ends in limbo?" CP asked the question to take a shot. The ball hit the backboard and went through the hoop. "That's three to five whiteboy!"

Kevin despised how some players would change the rules after the game started, as Hung Meng did in the tennis match at the club. "Changing the rules after we started is cheating." Kevin drove hard to the hoop and slam-dunked. "One more point, and I win." Kevin puffed up his chest. "The game is to seven, not to eleven!"

A large crowd had gathered. Even Gus had come out of the guard shack; he was the only person cheering for Kevin. CP was respected by his coworkers for his work ethic and his recent service in the Gulf War. "So, you must be the replacement auditor who is working with those communists to outsource our jobs."

"Whatever you say." Kevin bounced the ball to CP. "Six to three."

From the top of the key, CP was ready to inbound when one of his teammates moved under the basketball hoop and held his hands up for the ball.

CP tossed the ball high over Kevin's head to the tall black player, who slam-dunked with ease. The lunch crowd cheered. "The lunch whistle is going to blow. We'll have to finish at another time."

"No, let's finish the game now!" Kevin one-eighties to get the ball. A group of workers stood shoulder to shoulder; they all had their hands behind their backs—one of them was hiding the basketball.

"I guess this game will end in Limbo." CP chided, then smiled

Kevin was batting zero on getting anything accomplished. Whether it be a game of pick-up basketball, a tennis match at the club, climbing a mountain, or having an intimate relationship. In a loathsome mood, Kevin started the Range Rover and moved it to the rear parking lot—Trash Manufacturing wasn't for him.

CP walked over to Gus. "Why were you cheering for that guy? He's working with the Chinese to shut us down and put us all out of work."

"He would not shut down the plant. Grandpa Trask installed this basketball hoop on June 16, when he turned twelve."

"Gus, isn't he the replacement auditor to replace the woman who got in that horrible accident? She got decapitated while driving a convertible Mercedes under the rear of a semi."

"I didn't know about that. That must be why I haven't checked her in for so long?" Gus said with a stoic, blank emotion. "What happened to her?"

"It was an unavoidable accident," CP replied in a nonchalant tone, knowing that Gus didn't need to know the gruesome details.

"Oh…" Gus's expression hardly changed. He went on, "You just played against Mr. Kevin Trask on his basketball court. Grandpa Trask put it in on Kevin's twelfth birthday. He played here on weekends and lettered all four years at St. Andrews High School.

Mr. Kevin Trask earned a scholarship to Gonzaga. He left after his sophomore year because the coach told him to keep quiet about an evil priest running the college. After Mr. Kevin Trask quit Gonzaga, he played for the Duke Blue Devils. His number was fourteen. He did not start for the Blue Devils until his senior year. That was when he averaged 15.1 points, 6.9 rebounds, 1.3 steals, and 1.1 blocks per game…"

CP quit listening as Gus dictated Kevin's entire basketball career and discerned his own fate… *All my whiteboy talk probably did me in? Working reduced hours for the Trask business is still a good job. It's not that easy for veterans to find work. I should have kept my big mouth shut. I just cut my own throat and…*

Chap 14—————$50,000 Confidentiality Offer

The Mexican restaurant was somewhat empty; it was between lunch shifts for the industrial section of Long Beach. Kevin placed an order for two salads and ensured that one of the burritos didn't contain any meat or chicken. About halfway down Navy Way Road, he pulled over to the side. Through a couple of the open dock doors, he could see the bright flashing from the arc welders. The sound of screaming from air tools and banging metal was audible even from this distance. *I'm not sure this is the type of workforce Grandpa Trask would have wanted. It's probably time to sell and outsource. The current production levels hardly cover our labor costs.*

Gus was back at his post, and Kevin hardly said more than two words as the Range Rover got inspected. Kevin shrewdly didn't mention anything about moving out of the apartment and intentionally parked under the basketball hoop. With two white sacks of Mexican food, some workers were eyeing him as he walked across the parking lot and in through the main employee entrance.

"Did you have a good lunch?" Patty asked as Kevin took the last stair and then rounded the corner.

"Yeah, I played a little basketball, and it helped burn off some steam from that signing meeting this morning that went sideways."

"I'm not finished with my notes from the meeting," Patty said, almost as though she was apologizing.

"Hey, don't sweat it." Kevin walked to her small desk and looked for a place to set one of the food sacks. "I picked up a salad and a burrito without meat. I remembered from up at Shasta Lake that you don't eat meat."

"Thank you! I'm surprised that you remember that I'm a vegan." Patty replied with a smile.

"Oh, I remember. That was the day you also told me how our president was not calling it sex."

Patty's face started turning as red as the hot sauce inside the lunch sack. "He said that he did not have sex with that woman."

"Whatever. I'm sure that quote will go down in the history books." Kevin held out the bag and said, "Patty, you have only been here a short time. But what is your gut feeling about the workers down on the manufacturing floor?"

"I haven't paid that much attention, but morale has to be awful. I'm sure there are a lot of rumors about outsourcing jobs and selling off the business."

"I think you're right. I just played a pick-up game of basketball, and only Gus cheered for me."

"Kevin, most average working people just want employment security in their lives. All the uncertainty makes the workers frustrated and angry."

"Yeah, I suppose that you're right." Kevin turned and headed into the office.

Almost an hour later, Patty was standing in the doorway. "I finished up with my notes from the meeting."

Kevin looked back over his shoulder from the one-way glass. He'd been observing the workers building trailers for over an hour. "Just put them on my desk. I'll take a look at them before I go home."

Patty put the four pages of notes to the side of a big pile of documents. "Kevin, thanks for the salad and burrito. I very much appreciate you thinking about me."

"Yeah, no problem," Kevin replied, turning back to keep an eye on one particular black employee, who seemed to be the leader of the pack.

Another hour passed, and Kevin came rushing out of the office with the meeting notes in hand. "Patty, we need to go down to my dad's office."

With her notepad in hand, she almost tripped going down the stairs in her new high heels.

Condi looked up from her desk. "Kevin, I was just about to call you up. Your Dad wants to talk before he leaves."

"That's why we're down here." Kevin opened one side of the double doors for Patty and then made sure that they were closed entirely after they entered. Condi was annoyed by Patty's rapid advancement and inclusion in private meetings on such short notice.

The four pages of notes translated from Chinese into English by Patty were a huge game-changer. Robert Trask needed to direct rage toward someone.

Line 1 light flashed on Condi's desk phone. "Condi, I need you in here now!" The tone in Mr. Trask's voice made it evident that immediate action was required.

"Close the door and take a seat over there next to Patty," Robert demanded the moment Condi entered the large office. "That outside auditor slash controller that died in the horrible car accident a few weeks ago, do you know what temp agency she came from?"

Condi didn't answer; her mind was in a tailspin. The only thing she knew was that that white bleached blond whore had slept with her dad. The car accident in a brand-new convertible was horrible, yet decapitation was somewhat in alignment with what Islam teaches about the law of Zina. Decapitation seemed less cruel than being buried neck deep and then stoned.

"Condi, I also need to know if you have had any private meetings with the Trask corporate attorneys." Robert Trask's voice was still at full throttle.

Condi's brain was now in rewind. "The only meetings I have ever had with Sam or Mike were always with you. Never private."

"Have our attorneys ever had a private meeting with Mr. Hung Meng or Myung Chan?"

"Ah…" Condi relied, feeling pressured. "I think I scheduled a meeting for Myung Chan with Sam last week? If you want me to go check the appointment book, I can make sure."

"What about email or over the phone?" The tension was tightening like a noose.

"There were some emails about union contract stuff, but never any private one-on-one meeting with me."

"Go get the appointment book and shut the door. We got a mole to sniff out."

Condi returned with the black leather-bound appointment book. She pulled the door extra tight and walked over to Mr. Trask. "Here you go, sir."

"Wait here in case I have any questions." Robert Trask opened the appointment book to the last appointment and started working backward. "What's this entry?" he asked while pointing at an entry.

"That's a meeting Mr. Myung Chan set up with Sam right after the first signing meeting." Condi drew a deep breath. "Remember the meeting when Kevin showed up in shorts and moccasins after a late flight from Portland. That's when I made all his travel arrangements."

"Go sit next to Ms. Kelly!" Robert ordered.

Now, Kevin was feeling pressured. He didn't want to be involved, let alone get two women, whom he considered friends, involved.

Robert found two more appointments between the Trask attorneys and Myung Chan! He pushed back in his chair, stood,

and walked around, then sat on the front corner of the African-crafted, ebony desktop. "I know that I can trust Condi." Mr. Trask's eyes moved to look directly at Patty. "Ms. Kelly, I need to know if I can trust you."

"Yes, you can trust me. I will swear on my twin's grave that I can be trusted." Patty spoke in firm reassurance.

"Okay, good." Robert glanced at Kevin. "Ms. Kelly, from your notes and from some different appointments that Condi had recorded, it looks like one or both of our corporate attorneys are working with Mr. Hung Meng to destroy the Trask family."

"You had a twin?" Kenin asked to back down from his dad's intense cross-examination.

Robert stood directly between the women. "I need both of you not to say a word to anybody about this. Do not even discuss your suspicions with each other. It could get ugly in the next couple of months. I need reassurance from both of you. If either of you wants out, let me know right now and I'll write a check for your silence!"

"You know that I will stand by your side." Condi promptly answered. "I kept quiet when my father got terminated, and I will keep quiet now."

"I know, Condi." Robert cast his eyes downward, then walked back around his desk. He wrote some numbers on a Post-it pad, folded the blue paper, and handed it to Kevin.

Kevin looked at the figure and then nodded in affirmation to Robert. "Here is our offer." Kevin handed the blue sticky paper to Patty.

Patty didn't even look at it. She put the folded Post-it back on the ebony desktop. "The day Kevin called and offered me this temp position, he said he trusted that I would do what was right and keep things confidential. Nothing has changed. The Trask family has my trust. That was our agreement."

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The next day, Patty got off the bus and walked down Navy Way Road, having the same start-of-day conversation with Gus at the guard station. She then walked across the parking lot and entered the building. The starting bell had yet to ring, and there were the morning catcalls as she started up the stairs to the offices. The morning ritual of stopping at Condi's desk was the same, except that when they made eye contact, there was a slight nod—the nod of their sworn silence.

"Good morning, Patty," rang out before her feet were on the top landing. She was surprised to see Kevin in the office. It was the first time Kevin had been at work before her.

"Good morning," Patty replied as she headed directly for the small desk in the hallway to set her purse and lunch on.

"Patty, when you get settled, we need to talk," rang out from the office door.

Almost immediately, Patty stood in front of Kevin with a notepad and pen in hand. "Yes, Mr. Trask."

"There are some things I'd like you to do for me over the next couple of weeks. They are not Trask business-related. But they're important to me and others."

"Ah… Okay." The words 'next couple of weeks' felt good, knowing that she would be working longer than she expected. The words, 'not business related,' made her weary. Hopefully, Kevin was not going to start using her as Stan did at Lake Shasta as a friend with benefits pawn.

"Patty, the first thing has to do with Gus. I have noticed that he likes you, and it seems like you are fond of him."

"Yes, Gus is a nice guy." Patty timidly replied.

"You don't have to do this…" Kevin paused, knowing it was a big ask. "I'm hoping you could somehow start to work on him to get him thinking about moving to a brand-new condominium."

"Kevin, I can try. But getting someone like Gus off a routine can be very difficult."

"I've learned that about Gus, but I think I know something that you could do for Gus that would change up his daily routines and get him to trust and like you even more."

Patty's standing tall posture immediately turned to a downturned slump. She had prayed that those days of being used were behind her. "What is it that you would like me to do for Gus?" Patty asked in a monotone, dejected voice.

"You know those three-wheel bikes for people who have poor coordination? They're like an adult trike."

Patty's slumped posture straightened back up. "I know exactly what you are talking about. My Grandma has one that she rides to the open market in Chinatown, twice a week for fresh vegetables and supplies."

"That must be the grandma you learned Chinese from?"

"Yeah, she lives with us, she can't read English, and she never got a driver's license. Her three-wheeler is her lifeline!" Patty replied in her normal snappy tone.

"Gus had a three-wheeler, but it got stolen."

"How long has Gus been without his lifeline?" Patty's upbeat voice conveyed a sense of service to others.

"I'm not exactly sure," Kevin answered. "Since you did such a great job on finding that replacement inspection mirror for him. I was hoping you could look for a new three-wheeler."

"Not a problem!" Patty replied before Kevin even had a chance to finish his sentence. "Do you know what color his old three-wheeler was?" Patty asked as she put her pen to the notepad.

"I don't, but Condi will know. Have her cut a purchase order for whatever it costs," Kevin was liking giving orders. "Make sure you get one with all the bells and whistles."

"Kevin, getting something much different from what Gus had previously could be a problem. I'll work with Condi, and we'll do what's best for him. I'm thinking the same color will be vital."

"Thanks, I know you two will take care of Gus."

"Not a problem, anything for the Vice President." Patty kidded.

"Not funny, Ms. Patty Kelly, smoking hot body and Chinese-speaking chauffeur that is supposed to call me Kevin."

"Sorry, it's just that since I will be working a few more weeks, it's more professional if I don't call you by your first name."

"You're right… And I should never make the smoking hot body insinuation."

"Probably best not to. Although from you, I consider it a compliment."

"If you want to call me Mr. Trask or Kevin Trask, that works for me."

"How about Mr. Trask and I call your father Mr. Robert Trask?"

"That's good," Kevin replied with a sigh of approval. "Anyway, this next request will require you to stay overnight, and it is for me. I will pay you overtime."

Patty sighed; the smoking-hot-body reference a moment ago could be considered sexual harassment. But she enjoyed it, plus Kevin was hot. "What did you have in mind?" Patty asked in a sensual tone.

"I know that this is not in your job description, but how would you feel about flying up to Portland and driving my car back?"

"Ah…" Patty's mind flip-flopped from an office soap opera scene to a confessional. "I'd like to go to Portland and drive your car back. But…"

"You can do it on company time. I don't expect you to do it on a weekend. If you need more than one night, get a motel. I had to stop in Myrtle Creek on my way up."

Patty had no choice; now she had to confess her past failings. "I don't have my driver's license! It got suspended for a DUI, I got on New Year's Eve!"

"What?" Kevin was puzzled. "But you drove my Range Rover from the bar the other night."

"That was only because you had too much to drink," Patty mumbled.

"Wow, I'm upset and don't know what to say." Kevin rubbed his head. "That explains why you are taking a bus. Don't bother to look for a three-wheeler for Gus."

"Kevin, even if you're firing me, I would still like to find Gus a three-wheeler. He is the first person I met here at the plant."

"Firing you!" Kevin pulled his hand from his forehead. "Fire you for having my back? You could have gone to jail a second time for me. First, you stood up to that Shasta Lake Sheriff, and then you drove my drunk-ass home. Had we been pulled over the other night, you could have gone to jail for me again!" Kevin was angry with himself.

"But you're a Trask; it would have been better if I had gotten arrested than you."

"A Trask, my ass! Where do you get off thinking that because my family has money, I'm better than you?" Patty had struck at the heart of Kevin's belief. The reason he relinquished his scholarship at Gonzaga, as well as the reason he wasn't going to take over the Trask dynasty, would not define him.

"Kevin, I'm sorry that I upset you so much. I can go home now or finish out the day, whatever you wish."

Kevin leaned back in the executive chair and drew in a deep breath. "Patty, my dad wrote fifty thousand dollars on the blue Post-it. That confidentiality offer still stands. I could still use your help getting things wrapped up here."

Chap 15——————The Leak

All clandestine meetings were to be referred to by the code name **Gus's Place**. All appointments or conversations to weed out the mole would hypothetically focus on how to relocate Gus from his on-site apartment. The ultimate plan was to catch the lawyer who was providing Mr. Hung Meng with information. The first **Gus's Place** meeting was intentionally scheduled for Friday before noon in Mr. Trask's office.

Robert Trask began, "We need to finish this meeting before the lunch whistle. I don't want to arouse any suspicion from Sam or Mike with irregular meeting times during or after business hours."

"That shouldn't be a problem." Kevin injected. "I think Patty's plan to flush the mole out will work."

"Remember, Ms. Patty, no note-taking for you," Robert winked at Patty. "Condi is going to doctor up the minutes of this meeting. Duplicate notes could come back on us at a later date."

"No problem, Mr. Robert Trask." Patty set her yellow notepad on the floor between her and Condi's chair and folded her hands on her pleated skirt.

"Okay, so, at this Monday's meeting, if Mr. Meng's team doesn't talk amongst themselves in Mandarin, we'll know that Sam or Mike told them that Ms. Kelly understands Chinese," said Robert.

"I've got a couple of terms in the land sale contract that I will bring up; I'm sure that they will want to discuss them in Chinese," Kevin added to the plan.

"Ms. Patty, are you sure that it was just Kevin, you, and our two attorneys in the conference room when you stated that you knew Chinese?" Robert Trask asked.

"Yes, and I knew better. You should never let an adversary know what you know. It's like showing all your cards." Patty replied.

"That's a good rule to live by. Did you learn that in a business class?" Robert asked.

"No, from my grandmother."

Condi was getting annoyed with all the attention Patty was getting and injected, "They teach that in business class 101. The rule is not to share more information than necessary; always stick to the essentials."

"Thanks for that tidbit, Condi," Robert curtly replied.

"Your plan to draw out the snitch is flawed," Condi returned in a curt tone.

"I'm listening," replied Robert.

"What we should do is have someone ask a question that causes Patty to leave the room. If they start talking in Chinese after she leaves, we'll know for sure that an adversary tipped them off."

"Wow, that's brilliant," replied Robert. "What should the distraction be?"

"Let me handle that," replied Condi. "Remember, we don't want to share too much information, even amongst ourselves."

"That's true. I'm glad that you are not one of my adversaries." Robert winked at Condi. "Okay, I'll find something in the land sale contract that will start a heated discussion. Condi will create a distraction that causes Patty to leave the room, and by Monday noon, we should have our mole." Kevin rushed over the plan.

"Are you in a hurry or something?" Mr. Trask asked as Kevin continued to click a pen.

"I want to get up to Oregon and get my car out of long-term parking at PDX. I also hope to stop by the resort at Shasta Lake on my way back."

"Sounds good. Meeting adjourned," Robert said as Condi looked at her watch and recorded the time.

Not wanting to get stuck in Interstate 405 traffic, Kevin rushed out of the office, up the stairs, and grabbed the airplane ticket off his desk.

"Patty, could you stop by my desk?" Condi asked as she gathered up her notes.

"Sure, no problem." The two women walked out of the office together.

"Lock up my office after I leave," Robert yelled out.

Condi walked behind the half-circle counter and picked up a purchase order that had a phone number paper-clipped to it. "Here is the PO for Gus's three-wheeler, and the phone number is for my cousin CP. He has a truck and said he'd be happy to pick up and deliver Gus a new trike."

"Great, and thanks for letting me know what color Gus's old three-wheeler was. You know, Gus might not accept the new trike if there's not a good reason for him to have it."

"I know," replied Condi in a concerned tone. "His birthday isn't until December, so an early party would just confuse him."

While leaving, Robert overheard part of the conversation. "Remember, it's now against company policy to have birthday parties since we got sued for celebrating a day that not everyone could partake in."

"I know," replied Condi. "It's just that Kevin is getting a new three-wheeler for Gus, and we want to make sure he feels okay with why he is getting it."

"What happened to his adult three-wheeled bike?"

"It got stolen about two years ago," Condi answered.

"You're kidding." Mr. Trask said, somewhat ashamed.

"I feel bad that we didn't do something sooner," answered Condi.

"It's not all your fault," Mr. Trask replied.

"Patty was the one who found that new inspection mirror for Gus."

Robert looked directly at Patty. "Gus loves that inspection mirror. I think he calls it the eye-2-K or something."

"Y2K," Patty replied.

"Anyway, if Kevin said get a bike, then do it." Robert pulled out his car keys. "Order a cake and schedule it as an awards meeting. I want to be there to see Gus get his new parking lot inspection vehicle. Make sure you get it equipped to hold that Y2K inspector mirror."

"So we'll have an awards meeting, not an early birthday party," Condi replied with a glow of relief.

"Whatever you two come up with." Robert pulled on his suit coat and then headed for a round of golf at the Pasadena Country Club.

Kevin was stuck on the 405 and appeared to have missed his flight to Portland. *Maybe next week, Condi can drive my car back from Portland? Patty can fill in for her. That concept car is more trouble than I wanted.*

The next morning, Kevin punched in four numbers on the security pad, and the ten-by-ten-foot iron gate began to move. Tina watched Kevin slip through as the gate opened a little more than a foot. She hastily opened the car door on her Honda sedan, twisted in the seat, and deliberately let her sky-blue dress hike up while extending her tanned, waxed legs out the door.

She positioned herself just so on the trunk. One foot rested on the bumper, the other foot on the ground. The wind caught the cotton sundress, exposing most of her thighs. She slightly arched her back and smiled.

Kevin jogged up the cobblestone driveway, his muscular legs flexed with every stride, and sweat dripped off his face onto the Duke Basketball jersey. A few feet from Tina, he stopped, bent over, put his hands on his knees, and drew in a few deep breaths. "What are you doing here?"

"We need to talk," Tina answered.

"Talk about what?" Kevin snapped.

"Like, about you and me." Tina moved closer toward Kevin and grabbed his sweaty hands. "Remember how I like my men sweaty," Tina said in a sultry tone.

"Well then, I hope Tim sweated a lot on you down in Tijuana." Kevin yanked his hands away.

"I can explain all that." Tina reached out for Kevin's hands again.

"Tina, I don't care. That's between you and Tim. It can be your secret."

"That's your problem, Kevin! You have your own secrets and never share them with me."

"I've told you how my grandfather caught me skinny dipping."

Tina drew in a deep breath. "Jesus Christ, Kevin! I thought your sexual hang-ups were because your grandfather molested you or something."

"No, but that summer, Grandpa had me mowing lawns for unwed mothers. Looking back, it was probably the best thing that happened to me."

"Like you need to share that stuff with me. Like, we've been together for almost three years."

"Some things aren't meant to be shared if you're not married."

The word married sent Tina's mind into a whirlwind. Something she wanted, but the word sounded so old-fashioned and outdated.

"Married people should share everything before they tie the knot."

More old traditional values that Tina didn't care for. "Like, before marriage, you would tell me about being confused and coming out to the priest coach at Gonzaga."

"What?" Kevin's head jerked up to look directly into Tina's eyes.

"It's okay, I know how you were all mixed up sexually your first year, wanting to do some experimenting with a more mature adult. My stepfather was like that for me."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"I know the reason you had to leave Gonzaga. After coming out to the coach and all. How he got fired, and you lost your scholarship."

"Tina, you need to get your facts in order. I came out against the coach because he was defending the Jesuit Priest and the president of Gonzaga. Fr. John Leary, the child molester that the church hierarchy moved to another catholic school where he could continue to destroy more boys!"

"Ah… Like that's not what Tim told me…" Tina replied now in total confusion.

"Tim knew that I came out against the do-nothing coach. I didn't come out with that A-hole! Tim twisted a few words, and you fell for it."

"I must have misunderstood," Tina replied defensively.

"I wonder what he told you about Sue, the mother of his unborn child?"

"She isn't a good fit for Tim," Tina immediately quipped. "Sue quit taking birth control to trap Tim and ruin his chance at starting a dot-com company."

"I thought Tim was going to go to medical school or play in the NBA."

"Like Tim is still leaving those options open," Tina replied again in a defensive tone.

"I'm sure Tim will be famous and give you all the things you need!" Kevin pushed away, turned, and ran up the outside stairs to the guest house. He made sure the door got locked—in case Tina tried to join him in the shower a second time.

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About ten miles south in a neighborhood of tract homes, Patty was jogging on the cracked and crumbling concrete sidewalk. From a block away, the spotless white 4WD pickup looked out of place. As did the buff-looking jock in shorts sitting on the lowered tailgate, swinging his burly legs. Patty stopped her sports watch and then positioned the mace can in her right hand so that her finger was directly on the trigger.

When she was within thirty feet of her parents' home, the man in gym shorts and a tank top sprang off the tailgate and blocked the sidewalk. "Good morning, Ms. Kelly. I'm here and ready to complete my assignment."

Patty bent over and put her hands on her knees. "You must have CP, Condi's cousin."

"Yes, Ma'am. I was told to be here by zero eight thirty and that we would complete our mission no later than thirteen hundred."

Her sports watch was now displaying real time. "Oh crap, it is almost nine thirty."

"Yes, Ma'am. I don't mean to hurry you, but I'm meeting up with some friends for a ride today."

Patty stood straight up and looked directly into CP's dark eyes; there was something about him that she couldn't put her finger on. "Let me go grab the purchase order. I wrote down some different bike shops for us to check."

"Okay, Ma'am," He stepped to the side. "Yo, grab a towel or something to sit on!" CP barked out like an army sergeant. "I just cleaned my ride, and you are sweaty."

Patty ran up the walkway and hurried into the house. She found two beach towels and put her mace along with the purchase order

in a canvas bag. Her grandmother followed her out the door to the end of the walkway.

CP took one of the beach towels and spread it out over the passenger seat, and then ordered, "Jump in."

Patty quickly wiped the sweat from her legs and arms, then pulled herself up into the passenger seat. "See you later, Grandma," Patty yelled out the passenger window.

CP pulled away from the curb. "Your grandmother is Asian?"

"She's Chinese," Patty answered.

CP looked in the rearview mirror and said, "Looks like she's writing something down."

"The description and license plate number of your truck."

"Why? She doesn't trust me." CP asked.

"Grandma grew up in Communist China; she doesn't trust anybody," Patty answered.

The search for a three-wheeler quickly turned into a challenge. CP agreed that the color red was vital, but more importantly, the three-wheeler needed at least five speeds, and that the seat height was correct for someone as tall as Gus.

Patty didn't like getting treated like she was naïve about mechanical stuff, like a dumb girl. She finally gave in to the extra accessories CP wanted, but was not thrilled with having to wait almost two weeks to fill the order.

The only things they agreed on were each other's non-tribal tattoos. Patty undid the seatbelt, twisted and pulled up the back of her sports shirt to show CP the pink flamingo on her back.

Three hours later, when CP pulled to the curb, he noticed the front curtains partly open on the track home. "Looks like your grandma is still checking me out."

"Yeah, she will have my back forever."

"I would too with that pink flamingo tat, nice ink." He opened the passenger door for her.

Patty pulled the beach towel off the seat. "Thanks for your help today. I hope I didn't get sweat on the upholstery."

"Not a problem. I'll pick you up at zero seven hundred Monday morning."

"What? The three-wheeler won't be ready for ten days!"

"I know," CP replied. "It's too dangerous for a girl to be riding a bus in South LA. You're on my way, so I'll pick you up!"

Patty didn't have time to reply. Cp's spotless white pickup with custom wheels pulled away from the curb. Now she wasn't sure how to digest her feelings about him.

Monday morning, she always had to leave the house before six to catch the bus. The third signing meeting was scheduled for nine. She had looked through the curtains at least ten times. Exactly at

seven o'clock, the white pickup stopped out front. Grandma parted the curtains as CP expected.

In a new business outfit and high heels, Patty hurried down the sidewalk. CP opened the passenger door. The ride to Long Beach was forty-five minutes, less than what the bus ride took. Patty didn't say much; she was focused on the contract signing.

Kevin wasn't in the upper office. Patty needed to know when to leave the conference room. The phone on the hallway desk rang. "Patty, when I prompt you for wax, go directly to the supply room!" Condi hung up.

Patty knew that talking too much over the phone was risky. She sat at the small desk, taking deep yoga breaths. At five to nine, she went down the stairs and cat-walked through the doors into the conference room.

"Gentleman, we can get started now that my assistant is here," Kevin bragged.

Patty pulled the doors closed and took the chair next to Kevin at the far end of the table. On the other end, four men were watching her as she prepared her yellow notepad and pen.

"Kevin, you start with the two issues that we need to hammer out," Robert Trask said from the opposite end, with the four Asian men and the two Trask lawyers. Condi had positioned herself between everyone.

"Gentlemen, a big problem will be moving our security guard off-site. I was surprised that our attorneys missed this." Kevin glanced to the right. "Sam and Mike, you both know that Gus is autistic; a move could upset him, sending him into a panic attack."

The Trask corporate attorneys felt the pressure. The vacate living quarters stipulation had been purposely buried deep within the land sale contract. Mr. Hung Meng insisted on his security team. Gus had to go.

"I'm sure we can negotiate something," Mike offered.

"I was thinking that a new condominium would be paid for in full by Mr. Hung Meng. A three-year transition period with a mental health expert, along with lifetime employment."

"Are you talking about paying a mental health expert for three years after getting Gus moved off-site?" Sam asked while paging through paperwork.

"No! I'm thinking that it might take up to three years to get Gus to move." Kevin replied in a concise, clear voice.

Mr. Hung Meng went off like a Chinese firecracker. Myung Chan interrupted him in Mandarin. Dead silence followed.

Condi knew it was now her play. She swiped her hand, and a glass of water spilled over the center of the conference table. "Oh no, we just had this table refinished." She hurried to a cupboard for napkins and coyly pushed a button on the wall phone. Back at

the table, she slopped up the water while making a demand, "Patty, there is a special wood wax in the supply room. You need to go get it!"

Patty took her cue; she set her pen on the table and exited the room. When she entered the supply room, she heard a heated discussion in Chinese. Under the wall phone was an aerosol can of wax, sitting on a notepad and a pen. She started taking notes as fast as she could. When the conversation slowed down, she grabbed the can of wax and a polishing rag. The moment her hand twisted the conference door knob, total silence came over the conference room.

> Condi walked directly to Patty and took the can of wax and a polishing rag. "Thanks." Patty took her seat next to Kevin and picked up the pen.

Silence lingered until Robert Trask spoke, "Gentlemen, since there is silence, I'll assume that Mr. Meng is good with the three-year moving time frame and lifetime employment for our security officer."

Mr. Meng couldn't hold back! In Chinese, he yelled, "**不是有缺陷的人, 不是有缺陷的人**." When he saw Patty jotting down his words on the notepad, he rushed to the end of the table. She flipped the notepad over! Hung glared at his three partners and motioned for them to follow him. The four Asians left the building.

The silence was as heavy as wet concrete. Robert Trask walked to the conference doors and pulled them shut. "Team, it looks like someone supplied Mr. Hung Meng with the knowledge that Ms. Patty Kelly is fluent in Chinese. I'm going to take my son out to lunch with both of these lovely young ladies. By the time we return, I would like to know which one of you leaked that information."

Not a word was spoken until the limo's door was closed. Lunch was bittersweet. Robert was pleased that Kevin had discovered contract conditions that could potentially harm the Trask Empire. Condi felt good that her spilled water ploy worked. Patty hoped she would be needed at least for the next contract signing meeting. Kevin knew that vetting a new corporate attorney could take a couple of months, which was twice as long as he had wanted his VP tenure to last.

There would be no early lunch for the Asian lawyers! Hung Meng threatened deportation to the Yodok concentration camp. An unimaginable, horrible, nasty place where the meat from one rat can sustain a life for a week. A place the civilized world tunes out, like when protesters faced off with tanks in Tiananmen Square. Worse yet—Female Infanticide. Meng's ultimate plan was that this type of mind control by his communist party would become the norm worldwide. There would be a single common class ruled by the Communist Party and kept in line by the Red Army.

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Free speech via the budding internet posed a threat that Mr. Meng's mission had to be completed within the first three seconds of the 21st century. Nuclear suitcase bombs placed in and around the city of Angels would be the start of the end of the digital information boom. Myung Chan's mission, dubbed Pi-Y2K, would spread nuclear fallout over LAX, Long Beach, and south LA. The distraction was the window to inject a virus into the World Wide Web from the computer lab at Stanford University. It would be the primary source of the open-source Linux binary code virus that would infect most mainframes networked together in the academic world.

The second Pi-Y2K virus insertion point would be at Cisco Systems in Silicon Valley. This UNIX virus, written for closed-source code, would infect all business computers networked into banks, the stock exchange, and most backup data centers. The worm code added the mathematical constant Pi to the BIOS time rollover on the midnight of December 31, 1999. Pi, being an irrational number, can approximate the circumference of a circle, but when inserted into a computer time statement, any mathematical equation would never be exact. Three seconds into the 21st century, internal clocks in all infected computers would shift by the factor of Pi. The actual year and time (1/1/2000 12:00 am) would be shifted to (1/1/2000 12:03.141593652 am). Impossible to correct because Pi has no end and never replicates a pattern.

The Y2K virus insertion points required a copper Ethernet or a USB port. Silicon Valley and Stanford were within thirty minutes of each other, but there was only a three-second leeway of time to hit the Enter key at both locations simultaneously.

Chap 16—————The Concubine

The Trask attorneys failed to appear for the land-sale negotiating meeting. Kevin was both frustrated and anxious; his hopes to hold the temporary VP position for only a month had already passed. Mr. Hung Meng suggested they press on, but Robert Trask wasn't sure; he was growing more concerned and thought Kevin might be right. *Someone who cheats in a simple game of tennis will cheat you in a business deal.*

Patty had her pen and pad ready to take notes. Condi was at her desk, trying to reach either Mike or Sam by phone.

Kevin broke the silence. "Mr. Meng, at our last meeting, you blurted out some words in Chinese when we were discussing the on-site living quarters for our security guard. We can discuss that agenda item before our attorneys show up."

"I never speak Chinese at last meeting," replied Mr. Meng.

"Yes, you did," Patty interrupted while flipping back a page on her yellow notepad. "The discussion was about your company purchasing a condominium, and you replied in Chinese with, not for a defective idiot."

"I don't speak Chinese at that meeting!" Mr. Meng replied.

"Yes, you did," Patty rebutted. "You said it twice, that you would not purchase a new condominium for a defective idiot."

"Your Chinese must not be that good," Myung Chan butted in. "Mr. Meng said that he might think about helping out with purchasing a room for the retarded."

"My Mandarin is just fine. I know that Mr. Hung Meng used the words defective and idiot," Patty rebutted Myung Chan with confidence.

With an angry face, Hung Meng stood up and exited the conference room. His lawyers and Myung Chan followed. Patty realized that she had overstepped her position. Kevin had been hoping that the negotiations could move forward, not backward. Robert Trask was just about to speak when Condi appeared in the doorway.

"Mike Dugger crashed his car on Topanga Canyon Road early this morning," Condi spoke in a stoic tone.

"What? Is he okay? Was anyone else hurt?" Robert Trask asked.

"Mike was by himself. He just ran off the road into a rock outcropping. He's in a coma at Glendale Memorial Hospital." Condi answered in a daze.

"I'm going to head up to Glendale to check on Mike." Kevin stood up from the far end of the table.

"That sounds good. Keep me posted," said Robert Trask.

Glendale Memorial Hospital was less than an hour due north on I-710; Kevin often took I-710 home to the Trask mansion in Pasadena. The tone in the conference room turned somber as everyone picked up notepads and documents and headed to their desks.

Traffic was heavy. Kevin arrived at Glendale Memorial just before 2:00 p.m. The volunteer at the information desk informed Kevin that only immediate family was allowed on the ICU floor. Kevin left the hospital for the Police Department and found out where the accident had happened.

Driving down the winding curves on Topanga Canyon Road, Kevin saw the ash from road flares. Fifty feet ahead, he spotted disturbed gravel all over the road shoulder. He found a wide place to turn around and park. The Range Rover listed to the right and seemed to be on the verge of rolling down the embankment. Kevin set the emergency brake! The gravel road shoulder was disturbed and trenched by emergency vehicles.

There were two tire tracks down the steep embankment, and a fresh impact spot on a massive rock outcropping. Kevin slid down the loose gravel and walked through the pushed-over weeds. He could smell the antifreeze still pooled at the base of the gigantic rock. *If Mike had steered left or right just a few feet, he would not have crashed head-on into the fifty-ton rock.* Kevin ripped his slacks, cut his knee and hand, as he climbed up to the road. At eye level with the asphalt, one thing caught his attention—*no skid marks.*

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"What happened to you?" Robert asked as Kevin approached the pool.

Kevin stopped, looked at the dirt all over his hands, and then looked down at ripped slacks and a bloody knee. The Italian shoes were covered with dirt and oil. "I just came from the crash scene."

"I thought you were going to the hospital?"

"I did, but only family is allowed in the ICU," Kevin said, rubbing dirt off his hands.

"Did you find out anything about Mike?"

"No, the hospital has privacy rules," Kevin pulled out a white, wrought-iron chair. "I drove to the Police Department and found out where the accident happened."

"That's where you got dirty, at the crash scene?"

"Yeah, it looks like Mike was coming down Topanga Canyon Road, then went right across the oncoming lane down an embankment and hit one of those huge rocks head-on."

"Wow, I hope he'll be able to come back to work in a week or so."

Kevin pushed back in the patio chair. "Mike might not make it, and you're worrying about him coming into work."

"Kevin, the business world rolls on. Let's not get into one of your college philosophical discussions! This isn't about making a statement, like you did at Gonzaga."

"I'm not some philosophical student protester. Leaving Gonzaga was about doing the right thing. It is what Grandpa would have done."

"Yeah, probably," Robert replied and took a drink of Martini. "The business world was a lot different when your grandfather started Trask Trailers."

"You're right, if we can't negotiate a good union contract with the workers, Trask Inc. might not be around by the year two thousand."

"Kevin, I'm glad that you understand that. It could get ugly down at the plant. The more the workers demand, the more manufacturing we'll have to outsource to stay competitive."

"I know," Kevin replied in a downcast tone.

"On the upside, Mr. Hung Meng's lawyer called and offered one million dollars for a condominium for Gus."

"Wow, that is good news." Kevin's tone picked up. "I asked Patty to put a bug in Gus's ear about moving out of his tiny apartment."

"Good, that girl has been a lifesaver for us; knowing Chinese, taking notes, and now working with Gus."

"Yeah, Patty is great. She already pointed out a few things in the Union Contract that we need to negotiate."

"Oh, yeah, like what?" Robert Trask got distracted by Marie hurrying across the lawn toward them.

Marie approached the table. "Kevin, there is a Ms. Lilly Saxton here. She drove that fancy sports car down from Oregon."

"Thanks, Marie, let her know that I will be right there."

"What's that all about?" Robert took hold of the stem of the martini glass.

"I paid a fishing guide to drive my car down here from the Portland International Airport."

"A fishing guide?" Robert double-gulped his drink.

"It's a long story." Kevin pushed away from the table and stood. "I need to go pay her."

"Wise move, that was cheaper than flying the corporate jet up to Oregon." Robert Trask finished his drink.

"Yeah, it worked out." Kevin headed across the manicured lawn.

"Tell Marie to bring me another Martini?"

Kevin emerged from the study door into the entry. Lilly was standing in front of the entry doors. A blue backpack sat on the black-and-white tiles next to her bare, long legs. Kevin approached and held out his dirty hand. "Did you have a hard time finding our place?"

Lilly shook his hand. "No, your assistant Patty Kelly gave me good directions. That bag phone thing was also telling me when to turn." Lilly's eyes were taking in the mansion and thinking. *Holy cow, this place is larger than the Zigzag Inn*.

"Did Patty get you a hotel for tonight?" Kevin asked.

"Yeah, she got me a place by Disneyland. I told her I had never been there, so she got me a place that I could walk to from Disneyland. She also got me an airline flight late Saturday, so I would have most of the day to look around."

"Disneyland on a Saturday is a big mistake," Kevin replied.

"Oh, why is that?" Lilly asked.

"The crowds and all the people. You'll probably spend an hour just standing in line to get into the park."

"Oh well, I guess I can walk around Los Angeles," Lilly replied, exhausted from driving straight through. "I've never been to downtown LA."

"Walk around downtown? You do know Disneyland is twenty miles or more from downtown LA," Kevin quipped, then frowned.

"No, I didn't know that." Lilly now wished that she had never agreed to drive the Concept Mercedes from PDX to Los Angeles.

"Do you want me to call Ms. Saxton a cab?" Marie asked.

"Sure," Kevin was rubbing at the grit embedded in his hands and then offhandedly blurted. "Marie, forget the cab. I'll drive Lilly to her hotel after I clean up."

Marie noticed the rip in Kevin's slacks and pointed it out. "Did you get into a fight or something?"

"No, I slipped while climbing up an embankment." Kevin headed for the front door. "Marie, would you entertain Lilly for a few minutes. Maybe get her a glass of wine."

Lilly and Marie hit it off immediately. They were from the working class and of a similar age. Marie got a beer for Lilly, knowing she wasn't a wine connoisseur, and showed her around. About thirty minutes later, Kevin heard loud laughter in the

kitchen. He pushed the swinging doors from the formal dining room open. "What's so funny?" Kevin asked.

"Oh, Marie was telling me about the swimming party you two had years ago," Lilly replied and took a drink directly from the Modelo beer bottle.

A piercing look was directed at Marie. "Not funny," Kevin quipped.

"Hey, we skinny-dip up in Oregon all the time," Lilly said, hoping to reverse Kevin's scowl.

"It's private. It happened a long time ago. I wish everyone could forget about it."

"I agree, private stuff should be kept private," Lilly replied, smiling. "Skinny dipping is sort of like spooning, but in a pool, not a bed."

Kevin's scowl turned soft. "I thought it was that big black dog that was in the bunk with me."

"Oh, Tucker will never tell what happened," Lilly replied.

"Tucker is your dog's name?" Marie asked.

"Yeah, but I'm thinking we should start calling him Spooner." Lilly shot a grin toward Maria.

Kevin picked up Lilly's backpack, and she immediately snatched it back. "I can carry my stuff!"

Outside, Kevin opened the trunk and walked to the passenger door, while Lilly tucked her backpack next to the retractable roll bar. He glanced at her long legs as she pulled them into the SL600. "What Hotel did Patty book for you?"

"It's the Disneyland Hotel," Lilly answered, noticing Kevin's stare that unexpectedly warmed her from the inside. C*ollege frat boys are always on the make.*

"There are about three different hotels in Anaheim with Disneyland in their name. Is it the Disneyland Grand or the Disneyland Paradise? Is it one of the hotels on the resort property?"

"I don't know," Lilly answered. "I wrote the address in my journal. If you open the trunk back up, I'll get it."

"You can get the address when we stop to get something to eat." Kevin walked around the front of the car. "Do you like fish and chips?"

"Sure, I haven't eaten since noon myself."

Kevin sat down in the driver's seat and moved the seat forward. "You must be taller than me."

"I'm under six feet, I just have long legs," Lilly gave her standard response.

"I noticed." The V12 rumbled as Kevin steered around the Athena fountain in the center of the driveway and squeezed through the opening iron gate. "How did the car drive on the way down?" Kevin asked.

"It drove just fine. I thought about putting the top down, but I didn't want to mess anything up."

"All you had to do was release these levers." Kevin released a chrome lever right above his head. Then he leaned over and released the lever above Lilly's head, and then pushed a button on the dashboard.

Lilly caught a whiff of Kevin's cologne and hoped her body odor from the twenty-hour drive wasn't too offensive. But it didn't matter after the convertible top folded down and a roll bar came up and loudly clunked into place*. The wind feels good blowing through my messy hair, and now he can't smell the body odor.*

"They brew their beer at this fish and chip place we're going to," Kevin said loud enough to overcome the buffeting air noise.

"A beer sounds good," Lilly replied as she pushed her head back into the headrest and closed her eyes. The non-stop drive from long-term parking at PDX had finally taken its toll. Lilly dozed off.

Kevin turned on the Bose radio system and did an up-and-down of Lilly. *She has to be over six feet tall. She's got more muscle than most of the volleyball girls had at Shasta Lake. When she wakes up, I'll have to ask if she played sports in school.*

The fish shack was one of Kevin's favorite places in Glendale to eat. Lilly drank two beers before the basket of Halibut got to their booth. Kevin hadn't even finished his first beer and didn't plan to. He planned to work on Lilly when her guard got let down. Lilly was different than Tina; not snobby or fake. Kevin felt comfortable with someone who kidded about spooning. *One more beer and I'll ask some personal stuff.*

"This Halibut is better than the steelhead and trout we catch up in Oregon," Lilly said as she licked dipping sauce from her fingers.

"Halibut is my favorite fish," Kevin smiled at Lilly. "Care for another beer or maybe a drink?"

"I could go for a shot of Crown. It would help me sleep tonight. Since I'll be in a strange bed." Lilly answered, then finished the last of her beer.

"The last strange bed I slept in, a big black dog warmed me up." Kevin smiled across the table at Lilly and then ordered one double shot of Crown Royal.

"Are you not having a shot?" Lilly felt awkward, yet not afraid.

"No, I'm driving. But go right ahead. I'll make sure you make it to your room and into that strange bed."

Lilly smiled, drank the double shot, and chased it with another beer. As they shared an apple brandy flambé, a country western band started playing in the bar. Lilly was feeling the music and pulled Kevin into the bar. It took a bit of coaxing, but Kevin let her show him how to swing dance.

When he overhead-hand twirled Lilly, the crowd loved it. Another shot of whiskey with a beer chaser, and Lilly had a dozen patrons line-dancing. Kevin hadn't experienced so much good old fun since the long-ago Trask company picnics with three-legged sack races, water balloon toss, and all the other family stuff Grandpa Trask had tucked away.

Last call came too soon. He had fifteen minutes to confront Lilly. What he was going to ask could turn a perfect night upside down.

Coming from the ladies' room, Lilly approached Kevin with a somewhat sexy stagger, "Looks like you better take this cowgirl back to her motel."

"That sounds good to me! You sure know how to dance and party." Kevin drew a deep breath. "Before we head out, could we sit down? I need to find out some private stuff."

"Sure thing, you stiff-legged cowpoke. Let's talk."

As soon as they slipped back into the booth, Kevin got to it. "Lilly, that night I spent in your cabin and then the next morning after meeting Office Bull Elk and all, I did some snooping about your family."

"Oh?" Lilly had a sobering snapback to reality.

"Officer Bull told me about how your brother died on Mt. Hood. He also shared that when your dad carried me to the parking lot and put me in the old truck, that it could have put your Father into a very dark place."

"It did, but that very next week, Daddy got a contract to cut firewood for the new Indian casino on the Warm Springs Reservation. He's been so tired and pissed about cutting scrub Juniper trees, he's in a whole different place."

"Is that a good place or a bad place?" Kevin held his breath.

"Oh, it's a good place!" Lilly replied and hiccupped simultaneously. "I think he might have done something bad to himself if he didn't get back to work."

"Bad, like what do you mean?" Kevin motioned for the tab.

"I think he was thinking about killing himself. I hope this firewood contract lasts for a while." Lilly hiccupped again.

"Is there any work in the future for your dad?" Kevin asked as he stood, pulling bills from his money clip.

"There's a road clearing contract just put out by the Oregon Department of Transportation," another hiccup, "but they want it to go to minorities." Lilly was tired and getting annoyed with the interrogation. She had just had one of the best nights of her life, and now Kevin wanted to bring up her family problems.

Kevin handed the bartender four fifties. "Keep the change."

Lilly waited for the bartender to get out of earshot. "It cost that much for Fish and Chips and a few drinks?"

"Yeah, with the tip," Kevin replied. "And it was worth all of that. I learned how to dance with a line of people and swing with a cowgirl."

"Thank you," Lilly blushed from the inside out.

"Well, let's get you home! Ms. Lilly Saxton, dance instructor extraordinaire."

The warm evening air had Lilly's hair flying out of control just like her mind. She reached over and turned up the twelve-speaker stereo, even louder than what she had on the way down from Oregon. Whiskey Courage caused her to reach over and rub Kevin's leg while bringing up their spooning episode in the Saxton cabin. She also informed Kevin about skinny-dipping and how the cold water in Oregon's mountain lakes causes shrinkage. Kevin laughed, thanked her for the information, and started to share his skinny-dipping experience at Lake Shasta, but stopped. It was a memory he wanted to forget.

Kevin pulled in under the hotel's awning. The valet approached and opened the passenger door. Behind his mirrored sunglasses, he noticed the short jean cutoffs and beautiful legs.

"Thank you, Mr. Kevin Trask, coach driver extraordinaire," Lilly said, overcome with the lights and glamour of the entrance to the five-star Disney Grand hotel. She swung her legs out the door and lurched forward, then canted backward and plopped back into the passenger seat. "You might have bought me too many straight shots." Lilly slurred and tried to stand again. "These bucket seats are too low; they're not like a truck."

Kevin pushed the valet aside. "Yeah, and the hard stuff has a way of sneaking up on you and turning your legs into rubber." Kevin took both of Lilly's hands and pulled her up and out.

The valet moved back a few steps from the Mercedes prototype. Hearing the name Mr. Kevin Trask put him on alert. If he didn't hear or see anything, there could be a big tip for his silence. He watched Kevin slip his arm around the helpless model or aspiring Hollywood actress and practically carry her to the front counter.

"Can I help you?" the check-in woman asked.

"You should have a room for Lily Saxton." Kevin now had both arms around Lilly's waist.

The woman scanned through the names on her computer screen. "I'm sorry we don't have a reservation for a Lilly Saxton, and we are booked up solid, all through the weekend."

"I wrote everything down in my journal," Lilly offered, and then canted sideways. "It's in my backpack in the trunk. Should I go get it?"

"No, Ms. Lily, there is no reason for you to go get your appointment book. This hotel does not need you to fall in the lobby

or make a scene." The desk clerk snipped with a turned-up nose. "You two might find something away from Disneyland that suits you better. They rent rooms by the hour in Hollywood."

"Just hold on." Kevin looked at the desk manager's name tag. "Mrs. Thorp, could you call out to the valet and have him pop the truck and bring in Ms. Saxton's blue backpack?"

Mrs. Throp reluctantly called the valet and asked him to open the trunk and bring in Lilly's overnight bag.

Within thirty seconds, the valet ran into the lobby. "Here's the bag, Mr. Trask. If you need me to park undercover, just let me know."

"Thanks," Kevin said, passing the backpack to Lilly. "We need to find out if she has a reservation before you park the car. Our corporate secretary could have made a mistake."

The valet stepped to the front counter and said, "I'm sure we can find a room for a Trask. If not, Mrs. Throp can check one of our other three properties."

The check-in clerk searched for the name Trask. Sure enough, there was a reservation under Trask Trailer Inc. "I'm so sorry, Mr. Trask, you do have a room. Lilly got misspelled like the flower with two L's."

"Don't be telling me that you're sorry. Apologize to Lilly, you treated her like a Hollywood streetwalker."

Mrs. Throp looked at Lilly. "I'm sorry, Ms. Lily Saxton. I was rude. Please accept my apology."

"It's not a big deal." Lilly's thoughts were on and off. "The two L's are my dad's mistake from when he filled out my birth certificate."

"Mr. Trask, I'm going to upgrade your room from a single queen to the empire suite with a Jacuzzi and king bed at no additional charge." *That whore is not going to see Disneyland tonight,* the clerk said to herself.

Kevin snatched the key card and handed a twenty to the valet. "You can park the car." He slung the backpack over his shoulder and headed Lilly toward the elevator.

On the way up to the sixteenth floor, Lilly twisted inward to Kevin. "We never did slow dance tonight."

"Maybe another time, but right now I need to get you in bed."

"I'm on my second wind now. I'd drive log trucks for days on end before fire season."

"You should have stopped and not driven straight through." The elevator halted, and Kevin helped Lilly down the hall into the suite. He sat her on the edge of the bed, then pushed her backward, got on his knees, and unstrapped her sandals. It took some pulling and tugging before he got her between the sheets. Finally, he turned off the lights and locked the door.

Back at the front desk, Mrs. Thorp assured Kevin that a morning call and breakfast would be served in the suite at exactly eight am. She again apologized and realized. *This Kevin Trask is the real deal. Ms. Lilly screwed up—drinking too much never works out.*

Kevin exited the lobby, handed the valet another twenty, and headed for home.

This unplanned day was one of the best nights Kevin could recall. Traffic was light on Interstate 5. Kevin pushed down hard on the gas pedal, and the SL 600 accelerated to over a hundred miles an hour. He thought about Benny. Why would he sniff toxic fumes the day after he pulled the handbrake and saved us on Trinity Loop Road? It doesn't make sense. Kevin felt Benny in the fast-moving midnight air and slowed down.

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The morning call preceded room service, which brought breakfast and pushed a serving cart out to the private deck. There was enough fruit and food for a fire crew. Disneyland was larger than she had imagined. Rides were not in her plans; just strolling around Disneyland was more than worth the effort of transporting a car from Portland. Lilly showered, put on a light blue sundress and boots, and then headed for the lobby. Her once-stewardess mother explained how boots work as storage for personal items, saving luggage space. She was booked on the last flight from Burbank to Portland International Airport.

The cowboy boots paired with a flimsy dress were better suited to a rodeo in Oregon than to tourists in LA. Her carefree dress code drew some stares, along with a rude "yippy-ki-yah" in the lobby. Nothing was going to ruin this day. With her head held high, she headed toward the door.

"Hey, you," Lilly stopped dead in her tracks. "Did you sleep okay?"

Lilly turned and watched Kevin rise from an overstuffed chair. "Ah… Yes, I did. Did you stay here all night?" quizzed Lilly.

"No, I drove home after I got you into bed. I was going to have Marie show you around today, but her son had T-ball. So, you're stuck with me again."

"I'm sorry about last night, whiskey and beer don't mix that well," Lilly said while her brain rewound. "I hope that I didn't embarrass you."

"No, that hillbilly dancing was kind of fun," Kevin replied.

"It's country dancing!" Lilly snapped at Kevin.

"Sorry…" He noted the disdain. "Let's get a move on." Kevin grabbed Lilly's hand and pulled her out of the lobby.

By four o'clock, they had only been on three rides, and Lilly's feet were throbbing. "I need to get back to the hotel to take their shuttle to the airport. My flight departs at 7:20 p.m."

"We can't leave yet. You need to see the fireworks. They are awesome!"

"Fireworks are about to go off in my stomach after that Space Mountain ride."

"I'll call my new assistant. She can check about later flights. That is, if you don't have other plans."

The bag phone didn't have a signal from the underground parking at the Disneyland Grand Hotel. "We'll need to go to the lobby."

"Good, my feet are killing me. Maybe we can take a break on one of those overstuffed couches?"

"You'll need Mickey Mouse ears to watch the fireworks." Kevin grabbed Lilly's hand and pulled her toward the elevator.

Kevin called Patty from a guest phone in the courtesy area.

Kevin looked over at Lilly, "My assistant is suggesting flying out of LAX tomorrow afternoon. Would you be good with that?"

"Yeah, I just need to let my parents know."

Patty heard the female voice over the phone. "Kevin, put your guest on and I'll get her pertinent information." Kevin handed the phone to Lilly and then disappeared. "I'll be back."

Patty took down the information and said she would inform her parents of the new flight details. The call was professional, but it did have a tinge of jealousy that neither party wanted to acknowledge.

Lilly plopped into one of the lobby couches, kicked off her boots, then rubbed her aching feet.

Kevin returned with a set of Mickey Mouse ears.

"You want me to wear those?"

"Only if you want to." Kevin pulled her off the overstuffed leather cushion. "You'll need warmer clothes for the fireworks show."

"Wait, I need to put on my boots."

Kevin snatched up her boots and pulled her toward the gift shop. "Will you be okay with a Mickey shirt?"

The Disney Grand gift store didn't have a clearance rack, not even sale signs. Lilly peeked at one of the small price tags on a long-sleeved sweater—s*eventy-five dollars for a shirt, no way I can afford this.*

Kevin grabbed the boots from her grip and flagged a salesperson. "She might want you to ship these to Oregon."

"Not a problem. We just received a shipment of new comfortable walking shoes that I can show her."

Lilly was looking at an embroidered Minnie Mouse character holding a frying pan, serving Mickey Mouse pancakes. "My Mom would love this."

"What size is Mom?" the impeccably groomed salesman asked. "We got a nice line of golf shirts for the man of the house."

"Her dad's a lumberman, I don't know if he golfs?"

"Oh, I got the perfect hoodie for dad."

"We only came in to get some long sleeves for my friend for the fireworks show."

"I'm sorry." The skilled sales agent turned his efforts to Lilly and had her try on a leisure outfit.

Inside the dressing room, Lilly held her breath, looking at the price tag. *Spending $200 on sweatpants is ridiculous. I need to…* A light knock on the door tightened the knot in Lilly's stomach even tighter. She opened the door.

"Your boyfriend thinks you should try these on." The sales agent slipped some casual shoes through the barely open door. "I took your shoe size from your boots."

Boyfriend, what the heck? Maybe Kevin thinks I'm going to sleep with him. I bet the sales guy thinks I'm a prostitute.

Everything fit perfectly. Lilly filled out a shipping label. Mom Saxton had told her to accept any gift that the Trask family might offer with graciousness. That is what Jesus teaches—to refuse would be an insult.

After reading Trask Inc. off the platinum credit card, the salesman handed it back with complimentary tickets for a horse-drawn carriage ride from the far end of Main Street to see the fireworks.

The fireworks show was spectacular! During the loud explosions and skyrocket tailings, Lilly took Kevin's hand and squeezed. Unbridled cowardice overcame the fear of rejection. She knew her place on the social ladder; the concubine's rung was at the bottom, while the princess's rung was at the top. At the break of dawn, she'd be just another Lily in the pond of life—opening up to a new day. She'd never be in Kevin's class, but tonight that would be—

Chap 17——————Red Three-Wheeler

Kevin was standing at the one-way window when Patty knocked on the partly opened door. "Gus's three–wheeler is here."

Kevin turned and replied, "That's great, are they going to deliver it?"

"No CP is going to pick it up and make sure everything is as ordered."

"Sounds like you and CP have the three-wheeler task all taken care of."

"We do," Patty answered with confidence. "Condi will schedule a safety training meeting to present it to Gus. Your Dad said to get a cake, and he's okay with shutting down the assembly line thirty minutes early."

"By the way, how's it going with Gus? Do you think that you can convince him to move off-site?" Kevin asked with a worrisome tone.

"It might take longer than I thought, but I have been adding it to our conversations."

"Since Mike crashed his car and Sam hardly returns calls, it will probably take longer than I hoped to get out of the VP slot."

"I understand, Kevin. I have always felt that way with the men in my life. None of them has ever felt like the right fit for me. I often feel used and not respected."

"I don't believe that." Kevin turned and looked back down into the plant. "The way you have been around here. I've watched you down in the plant dealing with the union rep. Those workers in the plant respect you."

"Thanks," Patty replied. "Did Lilly Saxton enjoy Disneyland?"

"Yeah, we both had fun until we got back after the fireworks. I showed her our guest room, and she hinted that she might take a midnight swim. I told her about the fiasco up at Shasta Lake, about everyone getting drunk or high. It must have made her mad."

"Did you tell her about Tina?" Patty quickly asked.

"Yeah. And also, about you."

"What did you tell her about me?" A knot tightened in Patty's stomach.

"I started to tell her how you stood up to the sheriff for me, but she yawned and said she needed to go to bed." Patty knew how Lilly felt. Kevin had little worldly experience with women, but he was good on the basketball court.

Kevin moved to the desk and sat. "Not to change the subject, but do you know any minorities that would go up to Oregon and help clear and cut trees along the side of the Mt. Hood Highway?"

"Not really. Why?" Patty was confused.

"You know how you helped set up that firewood contract and all."

"Yeah, it was one of the first tasks you had for me."

"Lilly's dad has that firewood contract almost completed. Now there is another job: clearing trees along both sides of the highway. The State of Oregon put the contract out for bid, and from what Bull Elk said, it will probably go to the bidder that has a high minority work ratio."

"Should I call Sheriff Bull Elk?"

"No, the contract is for the Oregon Department of Transportation, not on the Reservation. Maybe you could call Lilly. Make it sound like they'll be helping us out with some of our laid-off workers or something like that."

"Not a problem," Patty replied. "I talked to Lilly a couple of times, arranging to get your car down here. I'll call her today."

"Great, I mentioned the work to Richard Johnson when I stopped by. He said he'd be up to going to Oregon for a few months. He and his wife are having problems."

"That's good, Condi's Dad would be another minority to go up to Oregon to log. Is he good with being the token black?"

"I didn't present the work to him like that," Kevin replied. "I'm thinking it's more like affirmative action. Plus, Richard wants to work and to move out of his house for a while."

"Okay, I got it," Patty replied.

"Don't let Condi know that I talked to her dad. Also, remember not to let the Saxtons know that I'm the silent partner in the Bull Elk logging operation."

"I got this," Lilly replied and pointed at a clipboard and the safety equipment on a chair in front of Kevin's desk. "You need to do a plant walk around before tomorrow's safety meeting. Afterward, we can give Gus the three-wheeler."

"Can't we give it to him right before everyone goes home and skip the safety meeting?"

"That's pretty much the plan. But Trask Inc. is behind on safety training, so we thought this would be a good time to catch up on some mandatory safety hours."

"Who are we?" Kevin asked in a perturbed voice.

"Condi and I," Patty replied in a firm tone.

"Okay, what do I need to do?" Kevin reluctantly asked.

"Just take the clipboard and walk around the plant. Mark down any violations!"

Kevin pointed at the hard hat, safety glasses, back belt, and earplugs on the chair. "I know what PPE equipment is; you didn't need to round up this stuff."

"Kevin, you need to wear that stuff when you're down in the plant."

"You're kidding." Kevin picked up the yellow hard hat and put it on. "I feel like a dork."

"Safety glasses also." Patty insisted. "You can probably get away without wearing the back belt."

Kevin put on the safety glasses and picked up the clipboard. "There must be fifty different things to check off on this list."

"Thirty-two to be exact, and don't get too gung-ho," Patty replied. "Mark down more than twelve violations, and you could self-generate a ten-thousand-dollar fine from OSHA."

"You're kidding?" Kevin started going down the checklist.

"No, I have been going through the Occupational Safety and Health Administration's Laws. In 1996, OSHA revised over 645 pages of regulations. Self-auditing is one thing that they are still allowing, but they will still impose the same fines for violations."

"Government overreach. Another reason to outsource," Kevin replied.

"True, but no one should have to sacrifice their life for their livelihood." Patty rebutted.

Kevin didn't feel like a debate; he left his office, rushed down the stairs, and busted through the double swinging doors into the plant. The noise level had to be over a hundred decibels; Kevin remembered seeing ear protection on the checklist. The following item he remembered was steel-toed boots. Kevin didn't even make it halfway down the outside of the U-shaped assembly line before he had more than twenty violations checked.

Within thirty minutes, his thin-soled dress shoes on the plant's concrete floor told him his feet would not feel good after an eight-hour shift. This explained all the workers wearing tennis shoes. Kevin systematically marked every violation down. Some of the workers peeked out of the corner of their eyes, and others stared directly at Kevin as though he were the enemy.

A large floor-embedded chain ran four hundred feet down the front of the plant and then made a one-hundred-eighty-degree bend and ran another four hundred feet up the backside of the plant. In under a thousand feet, a piece of channel iron hooked to the chain would become a Trask custom trailer. Grandpa Trask had

fought Robert Trask over the assembly line, but toward the end of his battle with lung disease, he agreed with Robert that it was the only way to stay competitive. Now, outsourcing was the way to remain competitive, and it was probably time to move Trask Inc. overseas.

With sore feet and a clipboard in hand, Kevin hurried up the stairs and rounded the corner. Patty stuffed the rest of her sandwich into her mouth. "Here's the safety check-off sheet."

Patty took the clipboard, finished chewing, and swallowed. "I see you found a whole lot more than twelve violations."

"Yeah, probably one quarter of the workers are wearing tennis shoes. Even when my grandfather was building trailers by hand, he insisted on steel-toed boots."

"You will have to bring that up at the safety meeting tomorrow," Patty said as she was looking down the list.

"I'm not the person to conduct a meeting. Get Condi, or why don't you do it?" Kevin immediately replied.

"The auditor who signs off on the safety checklist has to conduct the safety meeting within forty-eight hours. It's in the OSHA regulation." Patty fired back at Kevin.

"I'm going to lunch. We'll discuss this when I get back." Kevin didn't like managerial tasks, such as facilitating safety meetings, particularly to large groups. The decision-making behind closed doors was more than enough, and that task would hopefully become non-existent soon.

Gus sensed Kevin's stress and lifted the security gate without engaging in any conversation. Kevin didn't even get a mile away from work when the mobile phone rang. It was Tina—she was crying. An hour of cell phone usage of what-if, and it's nobody's fault, put Kevin in more of a stressed-out-testy mood. At his new favorite outdoor bar, the four Margaritas didn't ease the anxiety of conducting a safety meeting for 500 or more employees.

Through binoculars, Gus watched Kevin coming down Navy Way Road. Kevin pulled up to the orange barricade gate and got out of the car. "Gus, there is a safety meeting tomorrow at four-forty-five that I need you to attend."

Gus looked confused. "But, Mr. Kevin Trask, who will open the security gate?"

"I'll send out Patty Kelly; she will operate the gate during the safety meeting."

"I don't know Mr. Kevin Trask… I don't know Mr. Kevin Trask..." Gus started rocking side to side; his routine was changing. "Ms. Patty Kelly might not know how to open and close the gate."

"I'll send her out before quitting time today, and you can teach her how to operate the gate." Kevin had drunk too many margaritas and needed to use the bathroom. "I'll send her out at

four-forty-five today." Kevin grabbed his crouch and hurried back to his car. In his inebriated state, he parked under the basketball hoop and ran for the employee restroom. Standing at the urinal, Kevin read some of the graffiti off the wall—the Trasks were not popular.

Getting rid of some alcohol didn't help. Kevin couldn't take the stairs two at a time with his long strides. Patty yelled as Kevin steadied himself at the top landing. "The minutes from the last two safety meetings are on your desk. They should help you prepare for tomorrow!"

"Too bad… That you'll miss my first public speaking event with… With a bunch of people that don't like the Trask family!" Kevin staggered across the hall and into his office.

Opps! Patty thought as her stomach knotted. *Maybe this is my last day. I should not have pushed Kevin so hard to do his job.* It took a lot of effort to go to the office door. "Why won't I be at the meeting tomorrow?" she asked worriedly.

"Because you need to man," Kevin hiccupped, "or should I say woman, the security gate tomorrow. So that Gus can attend the meeting." Kevin hiccupped again. "Go out to his shack before quitting time today. He'll show you how the gate button works." Kevin leaned back in the high-back leather chair at the desk and closed his eyes—the office started to spin.

The ending day whistle rocked Kevin forward in the chair; he wiped at the alcohol tainted drool that had run down his chin. At the south window, he watched Gus signaling to Patty when to push the button for the orange gate to lift. *I'm so glad that I met Patty up at Shasta Lake. Thank you, God. There is no way I could have done one-third of the work around here without her assistance. Plus, she is good for Gus.*

Back at the desk, Kevin reviewed the minutes of previous safety meetings and began compiling an agenda. It was surprising that the steel-toed shoe violation hadn't been a problem in the past. Even Grandpa Trask made him wear steel-toed boots, back in the early days of Trask Inc. The dead silence down in the plant was refreshing. Now the only sound was doors being pulled shut and locked. Kevin was still working on the agenda when he heard footsteps coming up the stairs.

Gus appeared at the door with a red binder in his hand. "I can't move from my apartment downstairs, Mr. Kevin Trask. Super Hero JC has a plan, and He wants me to guard the tunnel. Ms. Patty Kelly keeps talking to me about moving, and she knows all about JC and how he has a plan for everyone."

Kevin knew to get Gus off the subject of moving, or he could be there all night. "Gus, what is that red binder in your hand?"

"It is my plan book that I have been working on. It is about keeping mini-submarines out of the tunnel. That is the tunnel Iron Man and Captain America built during World War II. Super Hero JC helped them, and now we need his help again."

"That all sounds good, Gus, but couldn't you work on your plan book in a brand-new condominium with maybe an office or?"

"Oh no, Mr. Kevin Trask. No, Mr. Kevin... That would not work." Gus moved across the office to the window. "JC put me at the end of the tunnel for a reason. I'll show you."

Kevin stood and walked over to the window next to Gus. "Okay, show me."

"See how straight Navy Way Road is and then turns." Gus pointed out the window. "The tunnel keeps running straight at the corner, right out into the Pacific Ocean. That is how they are going to bring in the bombs. The entrance is out there, and it is underwater."

"And they are going to use a mini-submarine to do that?" Kevin perplexedly asked.

"Yes, sir, a mini-sub," Gus replied with sure confidence.

"And where are they going to bring these bombs to?"

"To the exit of the tunnel that is right below us. To the old scuba training room, next to my apartment." Gus answered Kevin while he pointed down at the floor. "Super Hero JC put me there for a reason."

"Gus, your superhero might be making a mistake. Maybe he wants you to move into a new apartment that overlooks the harbor."

"No! No! No! superhero, Jesus Christ can never make a mistake." Gus replied in a loud, agitated voice while stomping his feet. "You are wrong, Mr. Kevin Trask! You should never talk about the superhero Savior like that!"

Kevin knew to back off from their conversation, plus his head was pounding. "Okay, Gus, I didn't mean that Jesus made a mistake. I'm just not as smart as you are, about the superhero stuff."

"Okay, Mr. Kevin." Gus calmed down. "I will bring you some books about superheroes so you can study up."

"That sounds good, but not tonight. I need to get home and call someone." Kevin headed for the office door. "Gus, don't forget that I need you at the safety meeting at four-forty-five tomorrow."

"Yes, sir," Gus replied, holding out the red binder for Kevin. "I wrote all my plans down just in case they kill me."

Gus is serious about this stuff— Kevin took the red binder and played along. "Okay, I'll look it over when I get home."

On the drive home, Kevin had three things on his mind: conducting the safety meeting, getting Gus to move, and getting back together with Tina.

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The next day, as planned, at four-forty-five, Patty walked across the parking lot to relieve Gus in the guard shack. Kevin was standing on the dock with his clipboard in hand. Almost all the workers were gathering below. The new red three-wheeler was under a blue plastic tarp and pushed up against the concrete dock. The only thing not covered by the tarp was the American flag poking out on a six-foot fiberglass pole. Condi and Patty were doing hand signals across the parking lot. They had warned Kevin about the workers' bad mood, because the safety meeting was scheduled for the end of the workday.

"If I could get your attention," Kevin said. "If I could get your attention… Please," Kevin pleaded in a louder voice. A few workers quit talking and looked at Kevin on the dock. "Could I get your attention!" Kevin yelled.

One of the workers put his fingers in his mouth and sent out a shrilling whistle. "Shut up and let the kid talk! I want to go home!"

"Thank you," Kevin said. "I'll keep this safety meeting short so that you can all head home." Kevin drew a deep breath. "Yesterday, when I did a walk-through, there were a few of you not wearing eye protection or your hard hats." Kevin drew another deep breath. "But there were a whole lot of you not wearing steel-toed boots."

The crowd was now dead silent. Kevin didn't see Condi over by the blue tarp, shaking her head from side to side and pointing at her shoes. She was hoping Kevin would see her and stop talking about safety shoes—but he didn't.

Kevin continued, "I know they are more comfortable, but you can't wear athletic shoes in the plant. It is a safety violation, and we could be fined."

"Not even if they have a steel toe and are OSHA approved," a voice in the crowd yelled.

"Ah, they make tennis shoes with steel toes?"

"Yeah, they do ass-wipe. You're just looking for reasons to outsource more work. Get your facts together before you feed us the Trask family line of crap."

A different voice came from the crowd. "Hey, rich-boy! I don't think those Italian dress shoes you have on are steel-toed."

Kevin waited for the jeering to subside. "Sorry, my mistake." Kevin's face had turned red while his mouth went dry. "The second issue is with Gus."

Silence fell over the entire crowd. "Gus may have to be moved for safety reasons and a business decision." Now everyone could hear the traffic on Navy Way Road along with the squawking of seagulls out in the harbor. If Kevin was going to pin a safety violation for Gus living on-site, a fight could ensue. In the silence, every worker waited for Kevin's next agenda item—a revolt was brewing.

"Gus has not been able to watch over as much of Long Beach as we would like him to do." Kevin was reading off the poorly scripted agenda. "Gus, could you come up here?"

"Yes, sir, Mr. Kevin." More silence as Gus penguin-waddled forward. "I walk the grounds every night. Except when it rains really hard."

"Gus, you have been working security for a long time here at the manufacturing plant. Maybe there are new plans for you beyond walking and guarding."

Almost everyone knew about Gus's superhero passion for looking out for people and things. Patty exited the gate station and scurried to the back of the crowd.

Kevin let the clipboard of agenda notes drop to his side. He knew that mentioning certain people, holidays, or even birthdays could lead to another lawsuit for Trask Inc. *Screw it—*

"Gus, after we talked last night, I admire your strong belief in superheroes." Kevin drew a deep breath. "Your superhero, JC, wants you to have this new patrol vehicle so that you can watch over more than just the Trask manufacturing."

Condi pulled the blue plastic tarp off the gleaming red three-wheeler. Gus froze!

Kevin jumped down off the dock. "Gus considers this an early birthday present, or whatever. Jesus loves you. He wants you to have it."

Others encouraged Gus to try it out. Gus got on and rode it through the parking lot with a newfound sense of purpose to serve and protect. By the time he rode between the third and fourth row of cars, about a dozen workers had gotten on their motorcycles and were following behind. Patty lifted the gate barrier, and Gus headed out onto Navy Way Road with the American flag waving behind him. It sounded like rolling thunder as the motorcycle brigade followed Gus around Long Beach harbor.

Chap 18—————Anno Domini

It was almost noon, two days after the safety meeting, when Patty heard someone coming up the stairs two steps at a time. After her first week, she learned the stride and speed of Kevin's footsteps. She rushed to the top of the landing. "Mr. Trask, I have some important papers to go over with you."

"Okay," Kevin replied, halting in front of Patty. "You're getting to be like a mother hen. Telling me I shouldn't eat cake the other night with the workers and now stopping me before I even get into my office."

"Sorry, but I need to get these papers into the Oregon Highway Department by the five PM deadline today!" Patty stepped to the side and followed Kevin into his office.

"You should have called the mobile phone in my car with something this important!"

"I knew you were down in San Diego spending the day with Tina and wanted to respect your privacy."

"Thanks, but call next time," Kevin replied as he moved behind the desk.

"Is this for the contract to clear dead trees out of the Mt. Hood Highway Corridor?"

"Yes," Patty answered and then sat in the chair in front of Kevin's desk. "The rush is that they want to get on this clearing project before the first snowfall."

"When do they get snow up there?" Kevin asked, somewhat perplexed, because a snow issue was something he never even thought about growing up in LA.

"According to Lilly, it could be as soon as Thanksgiving Day."

"Do you think there's any chance the Saxtons will get the tree-clearing contract?"

"Maybe, I found another minority to put on the list. So, with myself, Condi's Dad, CP, and the two Native Americans, they have a good minority ratio."

"CP, is that the muscular black guy always playing basketball at lunch?" Kevin asked.

"Yeah, he's Condi's cousin, and he's also the person who helped pick out and deliver Gus' new three-wheeler."

"This CP guy, he would quit working for Trask Inc. and move to Oregon?"

"We're not sure of the logistics, but he said he is willing to help," Patty said while holding back a whole lot more about CP. Stuff that she thought Kevin didn't need to know.

Kevin signed and initialed every detail for Patty, and as she was gathering up the paperwork off the desk, Kevin said, "I'd like to talk with CP before he quits."

"Ah… Okay," Patty replied warily. Nobody but Condi knew that she and CP were dating.

"I'll be down in my dad's office if you need me." Kevin hurried down the stairs.

Fifteen minutes later, the application, proposed contract, and all other needed paperwork were rolling off the fax machine at the Oregon Highway Department. Patty's next task required a hard hat, safety glasses, and a trip down into the plant. Screaming was needed to overcome the assembly line noise. CP yelled, "I'll come upstairs after quitting time."

Kevin spent most of the afternoon in the conference room vetting lawyers for two new legal positions. Mike Dugger was still in a coma and was brain-dead. Sam Anderson moved across the United States; rumor was that he was setting up a new law practice in the World Trade Center. It looked like sometime in the spring was when the next land-sales meeting with Mr. Hung Meng would take place. The fact that Kevin might have to be in the Vice President's position for at least a year was setting in, and it was disconcerting.

Back in his office, Kevin was just about to leave for the day when CP knocked on the half-open door. "Come on in." Kevin motioned to the chair in front of his desk.

"Ms. Kelly said that you would like to speak to me," CP replied and walked toward the desk.

"I heard that you might quit your job here."

"That's not the full story," CP replied as he sat in the chair. "Don't think that I want to quit working at Trask Trailers. But only getting twenty-four hours a week and not having additional medical insurance doesn't pay the bills."

"Why are you only working twenty-four hours?" Kevin asked.

"Since the managers started outsourcing all the wiring harnesses, my workload is reduced to just doing custom wiring."

"What do you mean?" Kevin asked.

"We're getting all these cheap wiring harnesses from China. You know the ones that are causing all the brake light failures?"

"No, I don't know," Kevin replied.

"Well, you should check with your legal department. There is a lawsuit for faulty brake lights that I had to give a deposition on a month ago."

"I'll do that." Kevin picked up a pen and made a note to himself. "Did we win?"

"I don't know. I think the lawsuit is a long way from being settled. A nine-year-old girl died." CP replied.

"Oh…" Kevin quietly replied and kept writing. "Do you know the name of the plaintiffs?"

"No, but your lawyers do. Mike and Sam are making it out like it was her father's fault. He had a DUI on his record and some other stuff. I'm sure that Trask Inc. will win that lawsuit."

Kevin quit writing but didn't look up. "Mike Dugger and Sam Anderson are no longer on the Trask corporate team."

"Oh!" CP replied. He didn't much care for either of them, especially their legal strategy to pin it all on the father of the girl who died. CP felt that it was most likely the fault of the outsourced wiring harness.

Kevin put pen to paper. "So why don't you have medical insurance?"

"You know how that works. Hire part-timers, and you don't have to give them benefits." CP snapped his answer at Kevin.

"No, I don't know how that works." Kevin looked directly at CP.

CP didn't know if Kevin was being sincere or looking through him. He didn't have anything to lose, so he just laid it out, "If you need another token black to fill some minority hiring ratio up in Oregon, I'm good with it."

"It's not like that," Kevin spoke half truthfully.

"Sure, thing Whiteboy! You're trying to act like Johnnie Cochran when he announced to the O.J. jury that he wasn't playing the race card?" CP rebutted.

Kevin jumped up to argue back, but CP's truth bomb flipped the debate. "Okay, it is a race thing. They want some minorities on the work crew. I asked Patty to pad the minority ratio so that a logger family might get the road-clearing contract."

"Well, then I'm in!" CP replies in an upbeat tone. "I drove heavy equipment in Operation Desert Storm. It will be more relaxing not having to worry about landmines."

"I bet that was never racking…" Kevin extended his hand to CP. "Thanks for the Operation Desert Storm piece. Thanks for your service," Kevin spoke with respect.

CP shook Kevin's hand. "I appreciate that…"

Kevin still had a more serious item to discuss. "We still need to finish our basketball game."

"I think the score was all tied up Whiteboy."

"Bullshit." Kevin snapped. "I was up by three or four!"

"Like hell! You might have been up by one point." CP snapped back.

"As I remember, I had you on your ass. I was up by at least two!" Kevin yelled.

Patty heard the conversation out the door and got up from her desk. She stood at the office door. "Is everything ok?"

"Yeah, this Whiteboy thinks that he's an NBA basketball star." CP glanced back at Patty with his game face on.

Patty was caught off guard, unsure of what was happening. At least the N-word or MF metaphor wasn't being tossed out. "CP, stop by my desk before you go home."

"Well, let's finish the game right now!" Kevin challenged.

"You're on Whiteboy! I'll see you outside." CP follows Patty to her tiny desk in the corner, ten feet from the stairs.

"You need to turn off the Whiteboy talk."

"Hey, woman, we're only dating. You're not my wife!"

"I know, but it makes you sound racist."

CP put on his game face for Patty and darted for the stairs.

"Is everything okay?" Kevin asked as he emerged from the door.

"Yeah, I just needed to give CP a warning about trash-talking at work."

"Whatever." Kevin was halfway down the stairs when he yelled. "I have my gym bag in the car."

The parking lot was about half empty. Kevin didn't care; he kicked off his dress shoes and stripped off his slacks. CP pulled his shirt up over his head; his chiseled, hard physique and bulging biceps would scare off most any challenger. It was impressive to watch CP dunk the basketball since being shorter than Kevin. College ball taught Kevin that pride-filled players were their own worst enemy.

Kevin approached the basketball hoop, and CP bounced the ball at Kevin. "One point per basket. Let's play to seven, Rich boy," said CP.

Kevin bounced the ball back to CP. "Go ahead, take it out!"

CP dribbled around Kevin and drove to the hoop, hoping for his intimidating slam dunk. Kevin planned for this bragger's move. He slammed the ball so hard that it rolled up against the shipping dock. CP inbounded and tried the same move again. This time, Kevin didn't attack so hard, and the ball stayed in bounds. Kevin retrieved it and did a simple layup. Kevin scored four points in a row. The game ended two to seven.

The second game started with CP charging into Kevin's chest with his massive shoulder and then doing an impressive two-handed dunk.

"That's a foul," Kevin yelled in protest.

"Hey, this is street ball, not college ball. Suck it up, Rich boy."

Kevin scored the following four points, and the trash-talk ceased after Gus rode over from the guard shack on his new three-wheeler to watch. Patty had been watching from the employee entrance door and warily worked herself to stand next to Gus. The second game ended four to seven.

"Let's play another game," CP blurted and then chest-passed the ball to Kevin. "I'm just getting my game on."

Kevin instantly shot the ball back, bent over, and pulled off his shoe. "I think I'm getting a blister."

CP approached and looked at the back of Kevin's foot. "Looks like those steel-toe treads did a number on your heel."

"Not funny!" replied Kevin while looking up at CP.

"Oh yeah, it is. The guys have been laughing about your safety shoe blunder for a couple of days now."

"You got a knife? I need to cut the heel out of the back of this shoe."

What the hell? You'd cut up a two-hundred-dollar pair of treads!

"It wouldn't be the first pair." Kevin started to remove his other shoe.

CP looked over at Patty and did an index finger circling next to his temple. Indicating that Kevin is crazy. "I'd like to, but I've been giving Ms. Kelly a ride home so she doesn't have to take the transit."

"How about a beer at the Mexican place on Navy Way?" On his knees, Kevin pointed to the south. "Patty can come with us; she knows the place."

"Sounds good," CP replied. "It will give me the chance to talk you into joining our city league basketball team. We could use a _____." CP halted the trash talk.

"Okay, I'll see you up there in fifteen minutes. I have some special ointment to put on this blister."

In his gym bag, Kevin found the small leather bag and shower flip-flops. He put the pouch under his nose and inhaled the peyote-laced balm. Next, he rubbed it on the back of his heel and started hearing weird sounds. It was Gus closing and locking doors in the plant. He leaned back in the executive chair and closed his eyes. *This salve from Officer Bull helps me relax. I should get some more…*

The words, "Mr. Kevin Trask… Mr. Kevin Trask." Broke Kevin's daze, causing him to rock forward in the leather chair.

"You told Mr. Charles Patrick that you wanted to drink beer at the Mexican restaurant. You told him to bring Ms. Patty Kelly. You said you would be there after you put special ointment on." Gus rattled off what Kevin had said on his knees under the basketball hoop.

Kevin opened his eyes; it took a while to make out Gus in the doorway. "Ah… Thanks, Gus, I must have dozed off." When Kevin stood, he leaned forward and had to put his hands on the desk.

"Are you okay, Mr. Kevin Trask?" Gus asked with grave concern.

"I'm fine!" Kevin found his car keys and cautiously used the handrail to go down the stairs.

Gus was right behind Kevin and followed him out to his car. "Are you okay to drive?"

"Yes, sir, Mr. Gus Watt. I'm just fine… just perfectly fine." Kevin fumbled with the keys; they fell onto the asphalt.

Gus beat Kevin to the keys and gripped them tight in the palm of his hand. "Mr. Kevin, you should not drive." Gus' voice was firm.

"Why don't you ride and be my superhero copilot if you're so concerned?"

Gus froze! Riding in a car would be a huge step; it had been over nine years. "I'll ride down to the Mexican restaurant if you go slow."

Kevin held out his hand for the keys. "Okay, big boy, go open the gate."

Gus pinguin-walked toward the guard shack, praying that superhero JC would protect Kevin and anyone along the road. He raised the gate, Kevin pulled through, and he lowered the gate. It took a couple of minutes for Gus to lower himself into the passenger seat of the SL600. Gus put his hand on the brake handle, concentrated on the road, and could barely breathe.

Kevin noticed Gus' white knuckles and slowed. When they turned into the Mexican food restaurant, Gus released his grip on the brake handle, they parked, and Gus got out and started back toward Trask Inc. "Come join us for a drink."

The short, slow drive down Navy Way Road put Gus' brain on lockdown. "No, thank you, Mr. Kevin Trask. I need to do my third check of all the doors and say my Rosary before I make dinner."

From the outside patio, Patty, CP, and others were doing a looky-loo. The Mercedes SL600 wasn't just a factory luxury car; it was a concept car that had all the factory race features, just no sponsorship decals and no racing number on the hood. Kevin started toward the outside patio while Gus headed North.

"What are you drinking?" CP asked as Kevin approached.

Patty hurried from the deck and rushed across the asphalt after Gus.

"I already asked Gus to join us," Kevin told CP. "He wants to do a third walk-around and pray before his dinner time."

"I bet Patty gets Gus to come back," CP replied and watched.

"I'll take you up on that bet. She is a real mother-hen, all her pecking won't work on getting Gus to break a routine," Kevin replied, still feeling the peyote.

Patty caught up with Gus, grabbed his hand, and then pointed back at CP and Kevin. Hand in hand, they started walking back. "Well, I won that bet," CP said. "Looks like the mother hen broke his routine."

Everything seemed in slow motion as Kevin watched, expecting Gus to halt, yank his hand from Patty, and…

"What are you all drinking?" Kevin asked as the four of them pulled up chairs under the table umbrella.

"Mr. Kevin Trask, I would have an orange soda first pick, root beer next pick, and water is okay too." Gus nervously answered while folding his big hands on his lap and sitting up straight and rigid.

The waiter came by to take their drink order, and the conversation quickly turned to basketball. Gus knew every player on the LA Lakers team and went on about the new seven-foot-one-inch center the Lakers had just acquired. CP contended that the new center had only made one three-pointer with the Orlando Magic team and wasn't a good trade. He stood his ground, even telling CP that he should quit trying to prove he could slam-dunk and just play as part of a team.

Kevin agreed that the score would have been closer if CP had backed off from showboating. CP hoped Patty would say how impressive his slam dunks were, but she just remained still. The waiter brought the drinks. "Are you going to want to order food?"

"Yeah, I'm good with ordering something," Kevin replied.

"I could go for something." CP picked up a menu.

Patty moved her chair closer to Gus to help him find something on the menu. Kevin commented that Patty didn't eat meat, and not to make Gus eat Vegan. CP wanted to know if she was impressed with his dunking skill. Patty shot a frown over the top of the menu, then went back to helping Gus.

The peyote salve mixed with beer made for an extra light-headedness.

"Fill me in on Shasta Lake," CP asked after he ordered the house special.

Patty stopped reading the menu and held her breath. *What if Kevin brings up 'It's not sexual relations' with Gus at the table? What will CP think?*

"Let Patty order, then I'll tell you about Shasta Lake and also about the night Patty drove me home from this very bar when I drank too much."

Patty didn't even remember ordering. She wanted to get up and walk away.

CP patiently waited for Kevin to order. "Okay, I'm ready to hear the stories about Patty at Shasta Lake and getting drunk right here with you."

"Well, it's not a good story." Kevin's tone turned solemn. "A young boy lost his life while a bunch of us were partying on a houseboat up at Shasta Lake. The sheriff came out on the lake to question me. No one would stand by my alibi except for Patty. She got hauled into the Redding jail with me."

CP had heard the story from Patty. He didn't need to listen to the heartbreaking details again. "What about driving you home from here? What's that story all about?"

"Patty came here for drinks one night after work with Condi. I drank too much, and she snatched my car keys and made sure I got home safely. Later, I found out that she could have gone to jail because she doesn't have a driver's license."

"Yeah, I know all about the no driver's license piece," CP said while reaching under the table to squeeze Patty's leg. "She is sort of like a mother hen watching out for all of us."

"No kidding," Kevin replied, "That's a good thing. She's had my back more than once."

"I will call you Ms. Patty Kelly," Gus added. "I don't like mother-hen."

"Thank you, Gus," Patty patted his hand.

When the waiter brought their food, Gus folded his hands and bowed his head. "Thank you, Lord, for this food and your son, Jesus Christ our Savior. May the COS team protect my friends here at this table. Amen."

Kevin, CP, and Patty barely had time to bow their heads before Gus was finished.

"Amen. That was a nice prayer," Patty patted Gus' hand again. "The COS team is the Communion of Saints team, is that correct?"

"Yes, not many people know that Ms. Patty Kelly."

CP wanted to change the subject to something other than religion. "Gus, I know you like reading comic books. Which ones?"

"I like the ones with Anno Domini messages. Like the Old Testament clues about the coming of the Savior."

CP was sorry that he asked. Kevin knew what Gus was talking about. He'd studied Latin and the history of world religions before Christ, his first and only year at Gonzaga University. In Latin, 'Anno Domini' (AD) means 'In the year of the Lord'.

Gus had collected every original Captain America comic from 1941 to 1950. He had them stored in an old Navy footlocker in his small one-room apartment. "If anyone wants to read how Captain America saved us during the last World War, I have all the copies."

"No, I'm good, Gus." CP declined the offer.

This night, Kevin didn't drink Margaritas, but the beers and peyote balm were still doing their thing, and he wasn't thinking straight. "Gus, if you moved off-site, you could have an office to keep your collection safe. I bet it must be musty being next to the water pool."

"No, no. Mr. Kevin Trask. It is not musty at all. Grandpa Trask made sure he double-sealed my apartment. He showed me after my mom went to be with Jesus." Gus' words made for a somber dinner; no one tried to change the subject or said much more. A patron at the bar overheard and noted that Gus had a collection of Captain America comic books.

By the time they finished dinner and coffee, Kevin was feeling steadier. Patty and CP left together, Kevin and Gus slow-stepped to the SL600. The bar hack wrote down the Mercades license number, then got on a pay phone at the end of the parking lot to call his Bookie.

Two beers, then dinner, had Kevin just under the legal limit for driving. He thought Gus might like a little excitement and pushed the gas pedal down hard.

"Benny will let me know if I need to pull the brake!"

Kevin let up on the accelerator and slowed to the posted speed. He stopped about a foot from the security gate. "Gus, are you good? I need to head home."

"Be careful, Benny, or I will not be with you to pull the brake." Gus hurried toward his small apartment adjacent to the old Navy training pool on the southwest corner of Trask manufacturing.

Halfway home, Kevin started pondering about drinks and dinner. *I never told Gus about giving Benny a ride. Maybe Patty told Gus about Benny? But I've never told anybody about Benny pulling the brake—*

Kevin put on the turn signal; he needed to go back and talk to Gus. Mysteriously, the bag phone rang. "Kevin, like, why don't you come down to San Diego this weekend. Like, we can finally be together. I promise to make it a weekend that you'll never forget."

Chap 19——————Going too far

Myung Chan had listened in on the conversation between Kevin and Tina. Her words, 'I want to show you a weekend that you'll never forget', were recorded on a cassette tape and would be shared with Tim Baylor in less than six hours. The long drive from Long Beach to San Jose was worth it—Myung Chan had material on cassette tape that he could trade for child porn.

Mr. Hung Meng had approved Tim Baylor's six-figure salary and paid the lease on expensive office space in the heart of Silicon Valley. He needed another understudy, and Tim Baylor exceeded his expectations. It took almost three years to get Myung Chan under his complete control, but he didn't have this amount of time to spend on Tim Baylor. The BIOS-clock virus attack on computer systems had to occur on January 1, 2000, within 3 seconds. The code name was Y2K. The greedy business plan of a few computer hardware companies to prevent the calendar on a motherboard from advancing into the 21st century was all about generating sales of new computers. Greed comes with a price, and that expense is always passed down to the working class.

A critical piece of the plan was that Tim Baylor would have to learn to trap and kill. Hung Meng knew that Americans set a high benchmark for human life. Unlike Myung Chan, who was born in

North Korea, tampering with the brakes on cars to cause an accident or death was no big deal. Death, starvation, and torture are everyday life in the Yodok concentration camp back home. Holding a can of fiberglass resin up to a child's face was similar to the forced waterboarding that Myung Chan took part in as a prison guard. The feeling of ultimate power when a body twitched for its last breath was addictive. Myung had never watched porn until Tim showed him the dark side of the internet—it was disturbing yet highly addictive.

Hung Meng knew how to use addiction as a tool. But often the addiction would take over an understudy, and he'd have to start all over again. Child-porn was now taking over his best student, Myung Chan! The words to gouge out an eye or to cut off a hand were disturbing, even if they were in the Bible. Parables about soul-saving were punishable by death in North Korea. Words that were removed from schools and state-run institutions in Communist China and North Korea. The fundamental reason the internet needed to be destroyed at the turn of the 21st century. Starting at the core, free speech ranked first in the Constitution.

After a six-hour drive through the middle of the night, Myung was pacing in front of a door that had **Baylor Anti-Virus & Maintenance** stenciled on the glass. The cassette tape was being clutched tight. Maybe it was nerves or lack of sleep causing him the anxiety shakes. More likely, it was the recorded sound bites of a woman wanting it.

Tim Baylor strutted down the open hallway to the locked door. "What are you doing here?"

"I got something on tape that you need to listen to." Myung held up the cassette as if it were gold.

"A cassette tape! Who uses those anymore?" Tim asked as he unlocked the door.

"I do, when I need to record a private phone conversation," Myung followed Tim into the two-room office suite.

"That's so old school. I don't have anything to even listen to a cassette tape on." Tim tossed his keys on the front reception desk, next to his new business cards.

"The tape is between Tina Williams and Kevin Trask. I recorded it yesterday."

Tim spun around and spoke. "Last night Tina was out with her girlfriends!"

"Maybe so, but I recorded her on a mobile car phone with Kevin Trask." Myung Chan turned the tape horizontally to read the label that he had put on the cassette. "She was on the phone with Kevin Trask last night."

Tim snatched the cassette tape from Myung Chan. "Do you have a tape player?"

"I do in my car. I'll go get it if you show me how to connect to those pornography sites on the internet."

"I'll get a site connected while you go get the tape player," Tim replied.

Myung left the office, and Tim went into the dimly lit back lab room. There was a private server in the center of the room, with five separate workstations connected to it. After a few keystrokes, Kevin was connected to the dark side of the internet—to a site that had more gravitational pull than a black hole in space.

Myung came into the darkened backroom and handed the cassette player to Kevin. "You might have to rewind the tape."

Kevin took the tape player. "Just type in what you're searching for on the red blinking line."

"Mr. Hung Meng wants me to find stuff to blackmail people with. He wants X-rated material so shocking that CEO's and college professors will pay any amount of ransom we ask."

"Sounds good to me," Tim replied. "I'm going out to the reception area to listen to this tape."

Myung sat down in front of the oversized monitor and typed 'children being raped' on the blinking red line.

In the lobby at the reception desk, Tim listened to the cassette tape twice. The sensual way Tina's voice sounded and how she hinted or directly implied that Kevin could ravage her sent Tim to the edge. He fast-forwarded the tape and jotted down **Hyatt Regency at Mission Bay Hotel,** the place they'd be staying at.

Myung was sexually gratifying himself when Tim walked into the dimly lit computer lab. He stood outside the door until Myung quit moaning. This primal act added to what Tim was feeling; he needed to hurt Tina in the worst way. She needed to be punished for her yearning for Kevin. Myung Chan would make a good cohort; someone who could inflict both physical and emotional pain on Tina!

Unbeknownst to Tim or Myung—Mr. Hung Meng was grooming them as a satanic team. Mixing a sadomasochist with a budding pedophile was something he was skilled at ever since the molding of man. Good people do good things for the good of all in the world. Evil people do things to benefit or gratify themselves—regardless of whom it might harm. The far side of eternity is a real place where no good exists. This dark hole with all its smothering force will have no end—not even a glimpse of the light of a new day. In the darkness, pride will be extinguished by torment, and love becomes unreachable, no matter how many times forgiveness is begged from scorched lips.

Tim shuffled his feet to make noise and then entered the dark room. "Myung, come over to this workstation."

Myung came around and looked over Tim's shoulder. "You might like this. I got videos of some different high school girls yelling the, Give it to me' cheer."

Kevin played a video; it was obvious that the girls were drugged. The camera angle was positioned to avoid showing the perpetrator's face. Just their hands wrapped around the young girl's neck

"That could be you giving it to them!"

Myung couldn't take his eyes off the screen. "Are they virgins?"

"Whatever you desire," Tim asked in an excited tone.

"You know, put your hands around their neck and squeeze until they pass out." Myung was so fixated on the prepubescent children that he just kept babbling while staring at the screen. "But it would be better to turn them over so that you could see the fear in their eyes. It makes you feel so powerful. The ultimate would be not to quit squeezing!"

"That would be one way never to get caught, by putting the victim down. I like your plan…" Tim replied

Tim and Myung were now feeding off of each other, exactly what Mr. Hung Meng planned. Tim could kill—now that he had stood at the gates of hell.

Chap 20——————Mother-Hen

A benefit of being Vice President—it doesn't matter what time you get to work. Kevin tiptoed up the stairs and slithered across the hall into his office. He made it by Gus with only a five-minute recap of the parking lot one-on-one basketball game, riding in a prototype car, and going to the local Mexican restaurant.

Now, if the mother-hen could give him a little time to make a hotel reservation at the Hyatt Regency at Mission Bay in San Diego, Kevin's long-awaited night to remember would be set.

He didn't even make it to his chair. "Good afternoon, Mr. Trask," Patty said from the doorway with a yellow notepad in hand.

"Good morning," Kevin replied with a downcast look. "Is it even noon yet?"

Patty, fully aware of the time, looked at the yellow pad and then started. "I rescheduled the early morning vetting meeting. Second item: Nick Icorn from Myrtle Creek, Oregon, will be back; he said you left a pocket watch in his motel room. Third item, Tina called."

"Wow, Nick found Grandpa's old pocket watch."

"Yes, he waited for two hours before he left. He said he'd be back."

Patty walked to the front of Kevin's desk and flipped to another page. "Item four, the union officials want a meeting. Item number five, we got signed off on the safety meeting without any fines. All those steel-toe tennis shoes got OSHA approved." Patty looked up and smiled over the top of her notepad. "And lastly, Gus has been up here three times to thank you for taking him out to dinner."

"Well, you can cross the Gus item off. I just talked to him," Kevin replied.

"That was nice that you brought him to the Mexican lounge," Patty offered.

"Yeah, I never knew he liked the LA Lakers that much."

"Did you know that it was the first time that he had been out to dinner at a restaurant in six years?"

"No, I didn't know that." Kevin looked up from behind the desk. "Now you're making me feel guilty for avoiding Gus sometimes."

"Kevin, he admires you."

"Well, it seems that CP admires you," Kevin casually said as he looked at all the paperwork on his desk.

"What?" Patty quipped a bit too loudly.

"I noticed at dinner you two seemed pretty close. Plus, he's been bringing you to work and all."

"That's just for my safety… So, I don't have to take the bus." Patty drew a quick breath. "While picking out Gus' three-wheeler, we got to know each other, and now we're friends."

"Well, that's good." Kevin shuffled through all the paperwork. "I might start playing on CP's city basketball team."

"That's what he said when we got home." Patty's stomach knotted—she'd just let the cat out of the bag.

Kevin was still shuffling through paperwork. "Did you see a brochure about steelhead fishing that I had on my desk? Ms. Saxton brought it to me when she delivered my car."

"Kevin, I know you don't want to be here, but going fishing right now won't make all this go away."

"That fishing brochure had some important stuff on the back!" Kevin knocked some of the papers on the floor.

Patty got down on her knees and began gathering the papers. The tri-fold brochure slipped from under the union contract. "Is this it?"

Kevin grabbed the pamphlet and flipped it over. The palm print was still intact under the clear packing tape. "Thanks."

Patty stood and started organizing the papers back into piles. "I'm still short of guests for the fundraiser for Senator Byron next weekend."

"Why don't you come as one of the guests? The food and entertainment at these events usually make up for the narcissism and kiss-ass speeches. Invite CP since he's your chauffeur."

"Ah… I've never been to a white-collar event." Patty held back excitement in her voice. She knew that the band Pearl Jam was featured, but the minimum one-thousand-dollar-per-plate donation dulled the elation. "On second thought, maybe I should pass on the dinner. They'll expect a big contribution, plus, I'm nobody important."

"Don't give me that not important crap! It will give you a chance to see all the backroom cronyism politicians engage in. Something I'm sure you don't learn about in your business classes."

"It does sound like the entertainment is going to be good, Pearl Jam is playing," Patty replied, now with concern in her voice.

"The company will pay for you and CP. Does CP like alternative rock and grunge music?"

"He's more into Jazz and the Blues," Patty replied excitedly.

"Give CP the phone number for my car phone. Since he invited me to play on his city league basketball team, I'm going to take him up on the offer."

"I'll do that," Patty said while jotting the request on her notepad. "The rescheduled vetting meeting is at one."

"Do you have the lawyer's resume?" Kevin asked.

"No, I think your father is looking it over. I can go ask Condi to make a copy."

"That would be good. I hope we can find a couple of good lawyers soon, so that Trask Inc. can get back on track with the land sale contract."

A knot instantly twisted in Patty's stomach. These last couple of months at Trask Inc. were more than what she ever prayed for. She knew that Kevin wanted out, but for her, every day was exciting, and now she was going to attend a white-collar political fundraiser with a big-name band.

The vetting meeting went sideways—it was rare for Kevin and Mr. Trask to agree. A lawyer who was under summary disbarment in Washington state for commingling a client's trust account would not be a good fit. Their consensus was that it might take all winter to find lawyers who could both represent Trask Inc. and protect the Trask living trust. Also, in the mix was the pending lawsuit for faulty brake lights on the newer cargo model of Trask trailers.

Patty heard Kevin come up the stairs two at a time. He went directly into the office. It was almost quitting time. She had news that would only add to Kevin's list of tasks. She stood in the doorway, silent. Kevin was looking out the window at Long Beach Harbor. Patty knocked on the open door.

Kevin turned and asked. "What now?"

"I just found out that the Saxtons are one of two in the running for the logging contract to clear the trees out of the safety corridor."

"Well, that sounds promising," Kevin said, walking to his desk.

"It is, but the State of Oregon wants all the employees, regardless of whether they are part-time or on contract, to have medical insurance above and beyond workers' comp."

"What's that mean?" Kevin asked as he sat down behind the piles of paperwork.

"Basically, the state of Oregon wants what is best for the workers. Hiring minorities, paying a fair wage, plus making sure that they have medical insurance are all things they would like to see in the contract."

"Is that going to be a problem?"

"I don't know." Patty shook he head side to side. "I've been talking to Lilly Saxton, and she is going to talk to an insurance carrier first thing in the morning. But their family hasn't had insurance for years. There will probably be an enrollment period if they get that far."

"No insurance for years? I remember her mom using a walker." Kevin rubbed his forehead. "Could we put them on the Trask Inc. group policy?"

"I could get with Condi first thing Monday morning and see if that is possible. I know from reading over the union contract that your full-time workers have a good HMO for their medical and dental insurance."

"Okay," Kevin replied. "What kind of insurance do our part-time employees have?"

"They don't have any insurance."

"What?"

"Part-time employees don't get insurance. That is one reason most companies are outsourcing jobs. Large benefit packages are bankrupting companies."

"Wow…" Kevin picked up about twenty pages that were bound together. "Now I get why the union is demanding a part-time to full-time employee ratio of less than ten percent."

"You got it! The union stays strong by protecting everyone. It's called solidarity."

"Yeah, but the unions orchestrate slowdowns so that production numbers drop. Their strategy ultimately causes the stock to crash, and in the end, nobody wins." Kevin dropped the union contract back on his desk. "I got way too much stuff to deal with!"

"Would it help if I worked over the weekend?" Patty asked.

"No, I'm going to San Diego," Kevin answered. "Make sure you have CP call me. I need to get on the court and burn off some frustration."

"I'll do that." Patty got to the door, then stopped and turned. "Kevin, a few days ago, you told me that you got out of line with Lilly Saxton."

Kevin looked up and thought for a moment. "Yeah, it was late, she joked about a midnight swim, and I scowled. I've been chided enough about that over the years. She said goodnight and went into the guest room."

"Oh, didn't you kiss her in the photo booth?"

"Yeah, sort of," Kevin replied and rubbed his forehead. "It was just one of those spur-of-the-moment things, which I now regret."

"Well, I don't know if Lilly regrets it." Patty tried to hide a smile. "Every time I talked with her, she asked about you coming up to go steelhead fishing."

Kevin took his hand off his forehead. "I'd like to take some time off, but you keep adding stuff on my list of things to do."

"I know," Patty replied, feeling Kevin's angst. "Lilly wants you to know that she wouldn't even charge you for her guide services. There's other stuff, but…" Patty stopped; she was aware of Kevin and Tina's weekend plans.

"What other stuff?"

"Nothing much, she always asks about you, and I don't think she regrets that kiss in the photo booth." From her business

classes, Patty knew playing matchmaker at work was a no-no. She wished she hadn't and slipped away.

Five minutes later and after a few prayers, with jacket and purse under her arm, Patty stuck her head in the door. "Don't work all night."

Kevin barely looked up and mumbled under his breath, "I won't, mother-hen."

He's right, I should have never stuck my nose… Patty was halfway down the stairs when Kevin yelled for her to come back. She did an about-face and then froze in the doorway.

"One last thing," Kevin said in a firm, straight tone. "I hope that you can stay on through fall and probably winter. There is no way in hell that I can wade through half of this stuff without your assistance. Can we adjust your work hours around your class schedule?"

"That would be great," Patty held back the urge to jump with elation. "The on-the-job training that I'm getting here is more than I have learned in any of my business classes."

"So, is that a, yes? You'll stay on."

"Yes, Kevin, I'll stay on." Patty so wanted to go over and hug Kevin, but their relationship had evolved beyond that of good friends to one of mutually respected business associates. It took hard work and time to ascertain her 'Mother-Hen' position. This was so much better than the self-destruction path she had been on since her twin sister died.

Thank you, God… Ever since I put it all into your hands, things have been working out. Please continue to look out for my sister, Cecelia, also… Patty prayed silently as she bounced down the stairs and exited Trask Inc. She practically skipped across the parking lot toward the white truck and waiting driver. "Mr. Trask would like you to call him about playing some basketball." Patty slid up and into the passenger seat.

"That's great, we can really use him," CP ran around the front of his spotless white pick-up and got behind the steering wheel.

She couldn't hold it back any longer. "And Kevin wants me to stay on through the fall and possibly the winter!"

CP reached over and grabbed Patty's hand. "That's great, babe! With your skills, you'll never be out of work."

"Are you talking about my mother-hen skills?"

"Yeah, but you got other skills, too," CP looked over and flashed a playful smile. "Let's go celebrate! I'm buying you dinner tonight."

At his desk, Kevin was going through resumes. Finding a lawyer to help wrap up the pending Hung Meng land sale contract was his priority. However, a class action lawsuit had to be settled, putting the Union Contract in limbo, and then getting Gus to move off the property all needed to be completed before Kevin could pursue his

own interests outside the family business. Kevin found a couple more candidates to interview and left their resumes on Patty's desk.

The mobile phone rang before Kevin started the SL600. "Hello."

"Hey, Bro, Patty said to call. She said that you wanted to play some ball with the team."

"Yeah, I need to get my head out of all the stuff down here at the plant." Kevin started the car and backed out of the space.

"Next Sunday we're playing at the Poinsettia Rec-Center in North LA at noon. You probably won't get any game time, but you can warm up and meet the bros."

"Sound good. I'll be there." Kevin moved the headset away from his mouth and yelled, "Okay, Gus! Yes, I remember what you said about my phone being tracked. But this is an important call." Kevin moved the handset back to his mouth.

"So, this is an important call?" CP asked.

"Yeah, sort of. But mostly I didn't want to deal with Gus and all the superhero stuff tonight. It's been a long week."

"Got it," CP replied and then continued. "I wouldn't drive your Mercedes to the Rec-Center, unless you can hide that phone in the trunk."

"The phone's bolted to the floorboard. But I'll drive the Range Rover."

"Sounds good, Bro. I'll write the address down. Patty can give it to you on Monday."

"Great! I'll get some practice time on the court at the country club."

"Patty mentioned that you need her to stay on through the fall and maybe winter."

"Yeah, she has been a real God-send."

"Yeah, she is," CP replied and then changed the subject. "This team we're playing next Sunday is one of the best in the city. We've never beaten them!"

"Good, sounds like a challenge." When Kevin put the handset back into the bag, he noticed that the GPS signal strength indicator had flashed four times. *Perhaps Gus is correct, and these phones do have tracking capabilities.*

Kevin had just gotten on the 710 when the mobile phone rang. "Hello."

"Mr. Kevin Trask, Mr. Nick Icorn is here at the guard shack with your expensive watch."

"I'll be back there in five minutes." Kevin glanced down at the display—the GPS indicator flashed four times. He also noticed a distinctive click through the handset. *I wonder if someone is monitoring this phone?*

The old, worn-down motorhome had its front bumper almost touching the orange guard gate, and dark blue smoke was billowing out of the side. Kevin pulled up directly behind it. The World War II Veteran/American flag bumper sticker was the only clean thing on the back. Kevin got out and started walking down the right side when the torn screen door opened.

A cane came out first, then Nick Icorn stepped down off the rusty metal step. "Sorry that I didn't make it during work hours. This old piece of crap stalled out on me; it needs a battery and a tune-up. Some punk-ass kid charged me twenty bucks for a jump!"

Kevin smiled. He remembered Nick's crass words in the lobby of the motel in Myrtle Creek. "Sorry that you're having battery problems, Mr. Icorn."

"Not a big deal. This piece of crap is on its last leg, just like me." Nick replied, reaching into his pocket and pulling out the pocket watch. "The chain got hooked on the lamp cord and somehow pulled your watch behind the nightstand."

Kevin took the pocket watch. "Thanks, I thought I lost it in the gravel parking lot or someplace after shooting pool? I was fairly intoxicated when they dropped me off at your motel."

"Yep, you were drunk as a skunk when Big Ed checked you in," replied Nick. "Those two dickheads you shot pool with said you're a lightweight."

"Yeah, I don't usually drink like that, but…"

"No need to explain, son," Nick interrupted. "I've tried to bury a lot of my past with booze. That inscription on that pocket watch sums up a lot."

Kevin rolled the pocket watch over in his hand and looked at the inscription worn down to where it was barely readable. "My grandpa's motto was. Work for God, do good and die, don't waste your life."

"Do and Die, also means, serve and die honorably," Nick offered. "Like so many veterans have."

All of a sudden, a loud pop blasted, followed by a massive ball of smoke from under the motorhome, and then it died. Gus dropped his inspection mirror and ran about twenty yards away! He started mumbling to himself and swayed back and forth.

"Big Bertha scared the big fellow," Nick quipped.

"Gus, it was just a backfire!" Kevin yelled at the top of his lungs. "Come on back!"

"Can you give me a jump?" Nick asked Kevin.

"I'm not sure where the battery is in my car," Kevin answered.

"Isn't that the fancy car dickhead fixed the brakes on?"

Kevin went back to the SL600 and popped the hood. Gus approached and asked, "What are you looking for?"

"The battery! Mr. Icorn needs a jump."

Nick approached and used his cane to point toward the trunk. "If the Krauts built this car, the battery is probably in the trunk or under the floorboard. Those Germans are engineering geniuses."

"Yes, they would put something like a heavy battery at the lowest point of gravity in a high-performance car like this," Gus agreed with Nick and then added. "The Germans built the Tiger Tank. It was an engineering wonder in its day."

"Nothing like the mini-subs the Japs were building back then," Nick added. "It was lucky for us that a HA-19 mini-sub got grounded on a reef the day after Pearl Harbor. That is how we knew how big to make the training tunnel for the Navy Seals."

Gus's face lit up. "You know about the training tunnel?"

"Yes, sir, young man. We're standing on top of the tunnel right now. It runs from the corner of that building." Nick pointed at the SW corner of the Trask plant with his cane. "All the way under Navy Way Road into the Harbor."

"How do you know about the secret tunnel?" Gus asked

"I helped design and build it," Nick puffed out his frail chest with a sense of pride.

"So, you know the diameter of the tunnel?" Gus asked.

"Yes, sir, young man. Twelve feet-two inches. The height of the Mini HA-19 was nine feet ten inches. That gave us one foot and one inch on each side when we brought our mock-up through the training tunnel."

"Wow! I didn't know they brought a mini-sub down the tunnel." Gus said

"Yep, we sure did. That was top-secret stuff back in the war days. Almost everyone who worked on the tunnel project has died off. That mission was top-secret."

"Did you know Bayani Bianchi?" Gus asked.

Nick snapped his head around, looked directly at Gus, and asked, "How do you know that name?"

"I found some of his superhero books in his old Navy footlocker. His name was inside the footlocker on the wooden lid, along with his passport and a photograph of his family."

"Are you talking about the Captain America series that started in 1941?" Nick asked.

"Yes, he had the first ten copies. I started my own collection and have every copy through 1953." Gus replied with a sense of satisfaction and ownership.

Nick smiled for a moment, then said, "Bayani loved reading those superhero books. In 1963, the Iron Man superhero series came out and hinted about this here tunnel under Navy Way Road." Nick pointed with his cane directly below.

"I know! I have collected every one of those copies also. I know all about the Repulsar Drill and Iron Man," Gus eagerly replied.

I got to get out of here, Kevin thought to himself, then said. "There must be a battery on the assembly line or somewhere in the shop. I'll go check." Kevin scurried away. *Those two will be talking about UFOs next.*

Gus and Nick did continue; their conversation never did turn to UFOs. Nick shared how Bayani had drowned in the tunnel and how it took him over forty-five years to track down his family back in Manila. In 1990, Nick flew to the Philippines with the news. Bayani's parents cried as he told them the story about how Bayani showed up at the Long Beach Naval yard on December 15, a week and one day after Pearl Harbor was bombed. Bayani was too young to join up, but he wanted to do his part to save the United States.

Bayani's parents shared that their youngest child, at age 16, left for the United States. Shortly after his arrival, they never heard from him again. Forty-five years later, Nick brought closure to the entire Bianchi family. When departing the airport in Manila, Bayani's mother handed Nick a stainless-steel flask of Holy Water from the baptismal pool at San Augustine Church, located inside the walled city of Intramuros, a historical place on the central Island. She asked Nick to sprinkle the water on her son's grave.

Nick could not bring himself to inform her that Bayani's body was pulled through the tunnel and out to sea due to an unusually low tide. Bayani's body was never found. This freak accident saved many lives; all future Navy SEAL training was conducted only during slack-tide periods, ensuring that no diver would be trapped and pulled by the strong tidal current.

While lowering a battery strapped to a handcart off the loading dock, Kevin could see that Gus was taking in every maxim Nick Icorn was spewing. As Kevin pulled the handcart behind him, he rationalized that getting away from these two ASAP wasn't being rude, especially since he had just called a mechanic.

"Mr. Nick Icorn knows all about the tunnel and is going to help me with important measurements for sealing it off from any outside evil force." Gus boosted as Kevin approached.

"Well, that sounds good," replied Kevin, trying to sound interested. "Our mechanic can't make it down here with a new battery until tomorrow. Let's get this motor home started and park it someplace out of the way."

Nick approached Kevin and grabbed the handcart. "I'll jump Big Bertha. You'll get all dirty reaching into the battery compartment."

"Sounds good to me," Kevin said, already headed toward the SL600, thankful his exit plan was working.

"Mr. Trask, one last thing!" Nick called out in his frail voice.

Kevin halted. This was not part of his exit plan. He walked back toward Nick. "Yes."

"Would it be okay if Gus lets me into the old training room?"

"Yeah, no problem," Kevin replied. "Don't pay the mechanic for the battery and tune-up. It's on me for bringing my grandpa's watch all the way down here from Oregon." Kevin was feeling less guilty about ditching out.

"Thank you," Nick replied with respect.

"Gus, it's okay to let Mr. Icorn look around that old Navy training room." Kevin reached into his pocket and peeled off some money. "Why don't you two have a Pizza delivered?" Kevin handed the bills to Gus—his exit plan was back on.

Gus and Nick got the motorhome started and moved it next to the apartment. They ordered pizza and root beer, then began discussing the tunnel. Gus was writing down every small detail, and Nick started double-checking Gus's math, the best that he could with an old Texas Instruments scientific calculator.

When Kevin got home, he examined the mobile phone more closely. It was mounted permanently; this made sense for something in a convertible. What didn't make sense was the lack of an on-off switch. Kevin called the main house, and Maria answered; Kevin told her he was home. When he put the handset back into the bag, the GPS indicator flashed four times. The longitude and latitude waypoints got marked and recorded. The words "Marie, I'm home," were also recorded on cassette tape up North in San Jose.

The next waypoint marked and recorded was Saturday from a **Motel Six** parking lot. There was no phone conversation to record. Kevin parked and went into the office to find out the room number. Kevin was at unease; this Motel was located in the seedy part of Hollywood. The motel clerk had called up to the room before Kevin knocked on the red steel door. There was the distinctive sound of ice being dropped into a plastic cup. Kevin swallowed and looked back over his shoulder; he hoped this would not become that day that he'd never forget.

The smell of alcohol reeked from the motel room, and Richard Johnson's head throbbed. Richard told Kevin to come on it. They discussed hitching a ride up to Oregon with CP to work on a road-clearing crew. Richard was okay with anything that got him out of this seedy motel. Riding up to Oregon with his nephew would allow him to apostatize and convert a family member to the Islamic faith—conversion never worked on his Condi.

Another waypoint got recorded from an MVP parking space at the Pasadena Country Club. Some practice was in order before Kevin showed up to play with CP's city league basketball team. Kevin walked into the gym and was immediately asked to join a lopsided pickup game of four-on-five. It wasn't the three lay-ups or the slam dunk that gave Kevin up; it was his behind-the-back and bounce passing. While at Duke, Kevin had 1075 assists, just

one short of the school record. A statistic that didn't gain him fame, but the unselfish assists helped Duke to the college NCAA championship.

The word got out and spread, just like it had a few months back. However, this Saturday, the county club members were watching him on the basketball court, not the tennis court. Out of character, Kevin even did a few slam dunks. It felt good to be back on the court, even if it was with a bunch of seasoned basketball hacks. Next weekend wouldn't be as easy driving the key for lay-ups on older gentlemen; it would be more intense. He might get some playing time against an undefeated city team.

From the MVP parking area, Kevin called Tina. He was flabbergasted by the abrupt way that she called off their planned rendezvous at the Hyatt Regency at Mission Bay. Their conversation didn't even last a minute; there wasn't a click on the phone this time. But Kevin thought he heard an exhale just before she hung up.

Again, Tim punched her in the stomach, where bruises don't show. If a date with Kevin happened again, he would take complete control and choke her unconscious.

Sunday morning, even with Nick Icorn staying overnight, Gus couldn't miss his Sunday ritual of going to church. Nick asked Gus to open the old training room before he rode off on his three-wheeler. Nick entered the musty room and could hardly breathe the thick, stale air. Even after half a century, the room looked the same. Amazingly, Nick recalled where the light switch was; the hum of the old mercury vapor lights coming on brought back all the bad memories of war. The haze from the lights warming up cast a yellowish color on the wooden lid that had been built over the practice pool. The smell of saltwater and the fifty years of mold growth on everything made Nick leave the room.

Outside, Nick filled his lungs with fresh air and went to his motorhome.

The pocket-sized flask of holy water was among some letters and cards. Nick had been corresponding with the Bayani's family ever since his trip to the Philippines. They were an actual dirt-poor family. Nick knew that even the postage to the United States was a burden for them. Each time Nick would get a card or letter, he would quickly scan the words to see if the family asked if he had sprinkled the Holy Water on Bayani Bianchi's grave—they never did ask.

With the flask of Holy Water in his hand, Nick stood at the doorway; the lights still had yet to come on to full brightness. He took a couple of deep breaths, twisted the lid off the stainless flask, and entered the musty room. He shook out all the Holy Water,

then twisted on the cap. Finally, I will be able to ship this flask back to Bayani's family.

Droplets of Holy Water were soaking into the circular, twenty-foot cedar deck lid. The mercury vapor lights finished warming up. Now it was so bright Nick had to squint. He backstepped to a wooden bench bolted to the concrete in front of the eight lockers. It could have been the lack of oxygen or perhaps toxic mold that caused Nick's mind to drift off course. He splayed out on the extended bench like a corpse on an exam table and relived the day Bayani Bianchi volunteered to test a rebreather and swim the tunnel out to Long Beach Harbor.

Slowly, a white sea mist filled the entire training room and gradually formed into a tornado, but instead of throwing things outward, it was pulling things inward, more like a whirlpool. First, the stale, toxic air and dust, followed by patches of mold, got sucked in. Then, a locker door swung outward, and a World War II rebreather was pulled into the center of the whirlpool. There were a few other items. Now Nick could feel tugging on his chest, his heart, and his soul. It felt like a cleansing after a two-week camping trip without a shower. Nick wanted it to stop at the same time, not wanting…

"Mr. Nick Icorn, I'm back from church," Gus yelled from the open door.

Nick turned his head to the side; it took him some time to get oriented. "Gus, do you see my cane?"

"No, sir, but the trap door on the cover over the training pool is open. Could it have dropped down there?"

Nick rushed over to the open two-foot-by-two-foot trap door and looked down into the dark abyss.

Gus went to Nick's side and pulled his three-cell security light from his belt holster. "Mr. Nick Icorn let me look." No way would he hand over his three-cell security special mag light, which had **Augustine Watt** engraved into it. "All I see is some seaweed and debris that has washed in from the ocean. There is something shiny reflecting off the ten-thousand-candle-power light beam. But I don't see your cane." Gus closed the hatch and wondered where the old lock went.

Nick Icorn wondered why his knee felt better, thinking it must be the ocean air.

Chap 21————The Nubber

Monday morning, Patty was even more upbeat than usual. She let Kevin go into the office and waited a few minutes before she was at the front of his desk with a fresh cup of coffee. "I got a hold of one attorney and left a message for the other. I'll set up vetting interviews for them this week."

"Thanks, Patty," replied Kevin while taking the coffee cup. "What's this?" Kevin asked about a Post-it stuck to the side of the cup.

"It's the address for the Poinsettia Rec-Center. CP said the team warms up at one, and the game starts at two."

Kevin put the Post-it in his shirt pocket. "What do you think about the two candidates?"

"Both lawyers look good, but you really can't tell anything from a few pieces of paper," Patty answered.

"Yeah, no kidding," Kevin replied.

"Maybe we should run background checks on them before they interview?" Patty suggested. "It's an added expense, but then you and Mr. Robert Trask wouldn't have to have that many vetting sessions. You could weed out the bad ones right off the bat."

Kevin took a sip of coffee and thought for a moment. "Would you run background checks on both those new candidates before they interview?"

"I'll get on it right now." Patty left the office

Kevin got up from his desk and walked to the window. Gus was walking toward the corporate entrance with Nick Icorn at his side. *Crap, I've got to get out of here*. Kevin headed toward Patty's desk and practically tripped over an old olive-green footlocker. "What's this?" Kevin asked.

"I don't know, it was here this morning. I thought it was some of your stuff." Patty replied.

Kevin knelt in front of the perfectly preserved foot locker and ran his finger over the US emblem—it felt mystical. He unclasped the right-side brass latch and then the left; his fingers tingled when they turned the key. Kevin lifted the lid, and an essence felt released. Patty was now standing over Kevin; her eyes immediately noticed the old navy clothes and personal items. Kevin lifted the old navy-blue wool jacket, and underneath, sealed in individual plastic sleeves, were the first ten Captain America superhero books.

"Those look valuable," Patty stated from over Kevin's shoulder.

Kevin carefully picked up the top copy and scrutinized the cover, which featured Captain America striking Adolf Hitler on the jaw. "These might be fun to read," Kevin said.

"I don't know if I'd call it fun," Patty stated. "That was a period when evil prevailed."

Gus and Nick Icorn had just made it to the top of the stairs and immediately saw Kevin and Patty snooping through the Navy locker. Gus released his grip from Nick's arm and handed Nick his cane; they walked side by side down the hallway.

Kevin stood up and asked, "Gus, did you leave this here?"

"Yes, I did. Mr. Kevin Trask. It has been here since 1941. I'm sure it is probably Trask's property now."

Patty and Kevin looked back at the perfectly preserved trunk, filled with items that seemed to belong in a WWII museum or on display in a collector's home.

Mr. Icorn saw the concern on both of their faces. "I could ship the entire trunk and contents to the Philippines, to Bayani's parents," Nick said in a fragile voice.

Kevin kneeled back down and put the copy of Captain America back on top of the pile. He picked up an old brush that still had some strands of smooth black hair in it. Kevin looked at the name 'Bayani Bianchi' that was inscribed on the lid. Kevin looked up at Nick. "Any person who would drive over a thousand miles to return a watch is someone I trust to return this stuff to the appropriate owners."

"Thank you," Nick replied.

"Mr. Kevin Trask! Maybe the Trask shipping department could ship the Navy Locker." Gus spoke anxiously, worried and not wanting to burden Nick, who barely had gas money. He volunteered something he should not have, but it felt compelling.

"That should not be a problem," Kevin replied. "Mr. Icorn, do you have a shipping address?"

"Yes, I do," Nick answered, then reached into his back pocket and pulled out an envelope. "The Bianchi's send me a Christmas card every year." Nick pulled the Christmas card out and handed the envelope to Kevin.

Gus didn't think twice about trusting in the Holy Spirit that the box would get shipped halfway around the world.

Kevin handed the envelope to Patty. "Have someone from shipping pack this up and get it shipped. Tell them to build a special shipping box and to be extra careful."

"I'll take care of it. right away." Patty replied with a firm, assuring voice while winking at Nick and Gus.

Nick handed Gus the card that had been inside the envelope. "I want you to keep this, to remember the closure you are bringing to the Bianchi family."

Gus took the card and stared at the Icon of the baby Jesus in swaddling clothes, in the arms of Mother Mary, with Saint Joseph looking over her shoulder. Gus wandered into his apartment and went directly to a cardboard accordion file box, walking his finger to a plastic sleeve to slip the Christmas card into.

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Before the lunch buzzer went off, Patty was standing in front of Kevin's desk for a third time. Kevin was looking over the profit and loss spreadsheet. "What is it?"

"Lilly Saxton called; her dad got the highway clearing contract," Patty answered in her usual upbeat tone.

"That's good news," Kevin replied. "When do they start clearing trees?"

"About ten days from now, maybe sooner. Lilly is going to call me back to let me know when CP and Richard Johnson need to be up there."

"Thanks!" Kevin leaned back in the executive chair and folded his fingers together behind his head. "It's great that I can count on you getting every little detail taken care of."

"Not a problem," Patty replied. "Lilly keeps asking about you and if you are still planning on going Steelhead fishing."

"I won't be doing any fishing if we don't get production up and expenses down," Kevin said while eye-glancing at the profit and loss spreadsheet now in front of him.

"Would getting the workers to take some concessions in the new union contract help?" Lilly asked.

"It would help, but production levels have to increase at the same time. Asking employees to work harder for less money is not a sustainable plan."

"That's why so many American companies are outsourcing," Lilly replied in a gloomy tone.

"Yeah, and the fact is that a deal with Mr. Hung Meng is probably the only way to survive. I don't like the guy and I don't trust him, but we can't continue on this path without going bankrupt."

"I don't like him either, but…" Patty's words were interrupted by her desk phone ringing. She left Kevin's office and transferred the call to Kevin.

"Kevin, I'm sorry! I was so abrupt the other night. Like I wanted us to be together in San Diego and all." Tina spoke timidly, "Like,

I bought something special that I wanted to put on for you at the Hyatt Regency."

"Oh crap! I forgot to cancel the Presential suite." Kevin inadvertently spoke.

"Sorry, Kevin, I wanted to make our night special and all, but I had a splitting headache, and my stomach hurt." Truth be told, Tim had slapped her around and then punched her in the stomach.

"Like, my parents are gone, if you want to come down on the weekend. You can stay here. They're on a cruise for ten days."

"I'm playing basketball this next weekend."

"What's the matter, Kevin?" Tina sensed hesitation in his voice. "Like, you don't want me to show you a night that you'll never forget?"

"At your parents' house just doesn't feel right." Kevin looked up when Patty appeared in the doorway with a Post-it stuck to her finger; she turned and left. "Tina, I'll call you later. I got a lot of important stuff here at work to deal with."

"I'm too worked up to wait for a return call, Mr. Vice President," Tina replied in a seductive voice. "How about I come up there?"

"Tina, I've got to go!" Kevin hurried out to Patty's desk. "Did you have something for me?"

"Oh, it's not that important. I have Lilly Saxton's phone number; she asked if you could call when you have some free time."

"Can't you call her back and take care of it?" Kevin asked.

"I can, but I think she really wants to talk to you about something private or about her mom or something… Maybe it was about her dog?" Patty held up her hand.

"Okay!" Kevin snatched the Post-it from Patty's finger.

"Kevin, we should also talk about Gus before this next weekend. If you invited him to watch the game at the Poinsettia Rec-Center, I could talk to him some more about moving off-site."

Kevin didn't respond; he stomped back to his office like a child given too much homework. He dialed the number on the Post-it, "This is Kevin Trask. You needed to talk to me!"

"Kevin, what a surprise to hear from you."

"I thought you had something important to talk about," Kevin said while backing down his disgruntled tone. "Something about your mom or your dog."

"No, my mom is doing great. Her hip is doing a lot better now that she has finally gone to the doctor. Thank you so much for getting the medical coverage for our family."

"Don't thank me. Thank Patty, she is the one who set everything up."

"There is nothing else?" Kevin questioned Lilly, puzzled about the urgency of the return call. "And your dog is okay?" Kevin asked.

"Oh, Tucker misses his spooning buddy, but outside of that, everything is going great."

Kevin laughed. "That name for a dog is wrong. Like the words spooning and forking, those are words that you'd better not get mixed up."

"Oh, don't worry. I know the difference between spooning and forking," Lilly laughed. Eventually, she asked when Kevin was coming up to Oregon to go Steelhead fishing. Their laid-back conversation lasted over an hour. Kevin hadn't laughed or felt so comfortable on the phone since middle school. It felt like he just found a new best friend—maybe even a fishing buddy.

From the top of the stairs, Kevin shouted. "I'm going to lunch. Do you want me to bring you back anything?"

"No," Patty shouted back. "Don't forget we need to talk about Gus about watching the city league basketball game."

When the gate opened, Kevin didn't drive through. "Gus, how would you like to come up to the Poinsettia Rec-Center this Sunday and watch CP play basketball?"

Gus froze up! Sunday was the day he went to church. Plus, he didn't know where the Poinsettia Rec-Center was. He would be totally outside the realm of his weekend routine!

"I hear that sometimes one or two of the LA Lakers show up at the Rec Center." Kevin offered as an enticement.

What Kevin thought was an enticement only put Gus further into lockdown mode. The past weekend, Gus spent with Nick Icorn went okay; he still made it to church, and they even finished the tunnel plans. An unknown motive or an influence from above was pushing him out of his comfort zone.

"Let me know when I come back with lunch." Kevin accelerated directly out onto Navy Way Road without stopping. He was thinking more about Lilly than Tina. He

Kevin ordered food to go and was back at the guard shack in less than twenty minutes.

Gus came out and nervously asked. "Mr. Kevin Trask, what time do they play basketball at the Rec-Center on Sunday?"

"I could pick you up at noon, practice starts at one. The game is at two."

"That will work, Mr. Kevin Trask. I get back from church by eleven," Gus forced a nervous smile. "I can be your brakeman, like Benny. You didn't stop leaving the parking lot and drove too fast."

"Sounds good. We'll talk later. I don't want lunch to get cold." Kevin noticed the brakes felt mushy when he parked in front of the loading dock and made a mental note. *I need to get our fleet mechanic to check the brakes…*

With two white bags and two drinks in hand, Kevin couldn't take the stairs two at a time. "I bought you a veggie burger and a Diet

Coke. I know you skipped lunch." Kevin set the drink and one bag on Patty's desk. "By the way, Lilly didn't say it was important that I call her."

"I didn't say it was important. I just said that she would like you to call." Patty replied while looking into the white bag.

"Well, she convinced me to get up to Oregon and go fishing with her."

"I can adjust your schedule and set it up." Patty offered.

"Maybe next month," Kevin replied. "I spoke with Gus. He's coming to the Rec-Center to watch the basketball game on Sunday. So, you can work on him moving off-site and into a new condo or apartment."

"That sounds like a good plan." Now Patty thought about how Lilly's trip might beat out Tina's trip. "Thanks for lunch. That was thoughtful."

"There's something else I wanted you to do." Kevin paused. "Ah, forget it. I lost my train of thought."

Patty's desk phone rang. Kevin turned and went to his office. Patty did a good job at disguising who was calling—it was Lilly.

The rest of the week at Trask Inc. proceeded without a single attorney making it through to a second interview. The union negotiations were breaking down, and production numbers continued to drop. There was a meeting with Hung Meng, and his demands to get back on track with the land sale contract were extremely intense. Every time Kevin went through the security gate, Gus said he'd be ready at noon on Sunday after church.

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Three hundred and sixty-three miles north of Long Beach in the heart of Silicon Valley, the Dotcom business was booming. That same week, Tim signed a contract to install anti-virus software on the Stanford dormitory email servers. It would take him a while to gain access to the college's mainframe computers. Tim was already playing the college-athlete, elite-all-star card; he had promised tickets to the NCAA championship game to one of the alumni fundraising facilitators. He also made the same bogus ticket promise to two different girls on the Stanford Rally Team.

Tina liked the looks of the new office space and was receptive to selling anti-virus protection contracts to large corporations. Her looks, low-cut blouses, and flirtatious personality would be her tools to attract the geeky IT types. Tim even suggested sexual favors might be in play for a signed contract of over ten thousand dollars. Tina told Tim that she wasn't a whore—Tim came back with the words 'deal-maker' along with a thirty percent commission offer. Tina added the conditions of no pimple-faced, smelly nerd

types and, at most, maybe a massage. Tina knew how to get her way with men—she'd been doing it since age thirteen. She accepted Tim's offer as VP of acquisitions for the Tim Baylor Anti-Virus upstart business.

Two hundred and fifty-five miles north of Silicon Valley, a recreational business was closing down. Houseboats were being winterized and repaired for the following summer of fun and family memories on Shasta Lake. Hank had just applied fiberglass in the new section of railing on the Stargazer while reflecting on Benny's short life. On a positive note, Conrad, Benny's older brother, was off drugs and was working on getting his GED. Hank put the $1,500 repair bill in an envelope and placed it in the accordion folder under the counter in the rental boat shack. Trask Inc. had overpaid for the damage to the Stargazer by thirty-five hundred dollars—money that was spent on his son's funeral.

Two hundred and twenty-two miles north of Shasta Lake, Nick Icorn was signing the Myrtle Creek Motel over to the two Dick-heads. Joe Burke and Randy Goody were the legal names on the deed for a total of two dollars. Nick's old motor home was running so well with the new battery and tune-up that he was headed to Baja for the winter.

Two hundred and twenty-seven miles northwest of Myrtle Creek, Kenneth Saxton was out back of the small fishing guide shop, sharpening and tuning up chainsaws. Ken felt good about not having to cut down burly Juniper trees for firewood. He'd be falling the real stuff, Douglas fir! The shop was close enough to the Zigzag River that the cold mountain water, running over rocks and under logs, sounded like music and served as a hiding place for Steelhead.

Senator Byron Sherpard's fundraiser was coming up. Tina was first and foremost on Kevin's mind. He planned to reserve a honeymoon suite somewhere near the Sacramento Riverfront Promenade. Tina was a ten-plus in the looks department, and her body was off the charts. She turned heads no matter if it was on a houseboat or in line at a meet and greet.

Tina was dragging her feet and wouldn't commit to attending the fundraiser in California's capital. Not taking the opportunity to meet important and influential socialites seemed odd; this was not like Tina at all. Kevin sensed that he might be attending the gala event alone. After sidestepping Tina's advances over his college years, the shoe was now on the other foot—Kevin didn't like it.

What Richard Johnson didn't like was riding shotgun all night and day up to Oregon, and then being shown a three-sided log lean-to to sleep in. Kenneth Saxton didn't say more than twenty words to CP and Richard; he pointed to an outhouse and warned them not to go into the A-Frame cabin up the hill. Kenneth Saxton

hurried off to his truck; a big cloud of diesel smoke floated into the open side of the bunkhouse and mixed into the musty air.

"I'll bet that, white-assed, racist has a sign posted in that cabin up there that says, No nigg____ allowed!"

"I don't know, Rich. Why don't you hike up there and check it out?" CP replied as he unrolled a sleeping bag on the lower bunk.

"I bet he's got booby traps up on the deck. Those white supremacist types love their guns and weapons. I'll probably kick his ass before our first day of work is over."

"Whatever, Rich, I'm going to bed." CP took off his shoes and crawled onto the lower bunk. "Mr. Saxton said he'd be back up here at zero-six-hundred."

"How the hell can you sleep when some redneck white guy tells you to shit in an outhouse?"

"Hey, Rich, I just spent sixteen hours driving and listening to your preaching about the Islamic faith. I'm exhausted." CP fluffed up the pillow, rolled over on his side, and spoke. "Don't tell Mr. Saxton you're a Muslim."

Richard didn't have a response. He pulled the flask from his pocket, took a couple of shots, and then unrolled the sleeping bag on the top bunk. These days, whiskey was the only thing that helped Richard get his needed rest and numb his pain.

CP was sleeping like a rock when something pulled on the sleeping bag. It was almost daybreak, yet the log lean-to remained dark. All of a sudden, a big black animal jumped up on the bunk and started pushing and clawing at his arms. The smell of wet fur filled his nostrils. "Black bear!" CP yelled out. The big animal jumped off and scampered out into the hazy morning.

Richard Johnson moaned from the top bunk, and then the snoring started again. CP got out of the lower bunk and started shaking Richard and yelling. "There's a bear out there! I just scared it off."

They were both standing at the open side of the cabin at the edge of the wooden planks. "I hear something," Richard whispered and then cupped his hands behind his ears to listen.

CP turned his ear toward the dim morning light. "Sounds like a truck."

"There are the headlights." Richard pointed into the forest. They watched the lights getting closer while the rumble of the diesel motor got louder.

The four-wheel drive stopped down the hill. The door opened and slammed. Ken Saxton went to the back and lowered the tailgate; he whistled and then yelled. "Come on, Tucker, it's time to go to work."

Richard Johnson bolted back toward his shoes next to the bunk ladder. I'm going to kick that hillbilly's ass. Now he's calling us fuckers.

CP made out a big ball of black fur running toward the truck and jumping up on the lowered tailgate.

CP turned around. "I think the dog's name is Tucker. It just jumped into the back of that old truck."

Richard was sitting on the lower bunk, tying his shoes. "I'm still kicking his ass for making us sleep out here in this slave shack."

Ken Saxton approached with a picnic basket in one hand and a thermos in the other. "Come on up to the cabin. The wife made you two breakfasts."

The smell of whatever was in the basket quickly had both apprentice loggers in pursuit up the trail and onto the deck. Ken poured hot coffee and placed a tray of breakfast burritos on the old cable spool, which had been retrofitted into a picnic table. There were no more than ten words exchanged while CP and Richard gulped coffee and ate. The horizontal sun rays were now shining on Mt. Jefferson, fifty miles south down the Cascade Mountain range.

Ken poured more coffee and then dug deeper into the picnic basket. "The wife made cinnamon rolls." As Ken unfolded the aluminum foil, the fresh bread and cinnamon aroma mixed into the brisk morning air. The sun began to hit different mountain peaks, painting the landscape below the timberline with light. The three men sat silent, drinking coffee with mixed emotions—this forced partnership would probably end in a fight before sunset on this first day.

Ken started. "Either of you logged or run heavy quipment before?"

"You mean heavy equipment?" CP asked.

"Yep, heavy quipment or ran a chansaw," Kenneth answered.

"I helped build airports in Kuwait during Desert Storm," CP said.

Kenneth practically stood at attention and looked CP squarely in the eyes. "Thank you for your service to our great country."

"Thanks," CP replied

"I've run a chainsaw," Richard said, mocking Ken's logger slang.

"What size bar? Was it a Husky or a Stihl?" Kenneth asked

Richard thought for a while. "I don't know. It's an electric saw that I used for landscaping. I got it at the hardware store."

"Good, so you've been a landscaper," Kenneth replied

Richard didn't respond. He had been a shop foreman with a crew of over four hundred men. It was obvious Ken was an ignorant asshole.

"CP, you'll run the loader. I'll fall trees, and Johnson will be my nubber."

"I'm not your nigger!" Richard jumped up and clenched his fist. "I don't care what kind of redneck slang you call me by. I'm no one's nigger!"

"That's okay by me," Ken yelled back. "I don't like the words Spick, Squaw, Faggot, or the cunt word. Don't use any of those words either while on my crew!"

Richard was perplexed and looked over at CP. "Can you even understand this guy?"

"If you shut up and give the man a chance to speak, maybe I could."

Richard plopped back down and looked back over his shoulder at the front of the A-frame. He took note of the broken window glass on the deck and folded his arms across his chest.

Kenneth folded up the aluminum foil for reuse. He prudently put it into the picnic basket, then looked at CP. "My log truck is a self-loader. You think you can figure it out?"

"Yeah, shouldn't be a problem. But I don't have a CDL for Oregon."

"Don't worry. I know the Sheriff who patrols the highway. Bull Whitefoot won't give you a ticket if you're driving one of my rigs."

"I'm not sure about that. A black man driving a logging truck probably will get pulled over regardless."

Ken paused and thought. Richard turned away from the front of the cabin to see how Ken would answer.

"Yep, you're right. Some white guys patrol the Mt. Hood Highway. I'll give Officer Bull a call and see how to get you legal and all."

"Mr. Johnson, is it okay that I just call you Johnson?" Ken asked.

"Yeah, fine," Richard quipped. "I'll call you, Ken."

"There are some dead trees up yonder that we'll practice on. We'll get'em down, nubbed up, and loaded today. Tomorrow we all need to be working in the corridor. Wait here." Ken left the cabin deck and headed for the pickup truck.

"What a dumb ass illiterate that guy is," Richard said loud enough for CP to hear.

"Yeah, I don't think he's had much schooling. But talk about good food."

"No kidding! Those sausage burritos were great. The homemade cinnamon rolls were delicious. He must have a good wife." Richard thought about his wife's cooking.

CP watched the big old diesel truck work itself up around the cabin. Ken waved for them to follow.

Finally, the truck stopped. Kenneth jumped out and let the tailgate down. "Stay, Tucker."

CP approached the back of the truck. "Your dog jumped onto my bunk this morning. I thought it was a bear."

"Yep, that's ole Tucker, he likes to spoon," Ken said. Tucker came to the edge of the tailgate wagging his tail. CP reached up and started petting Tucker; the wet dog smell was familiar.

Richard approached, bent over, put his hands on his knees, and gasped at the thin mountain air. "What kind of people name their dog Tucker?" Richard said between breaths. "That could start a fight."

"My son named the dog. Billy thought it was funny." Ken pulled out a massive chainsaw from the back of the truck and set it on the ground. He then grabbed a small chainsaw and handed it to Richard. "You'll use this saw for nubbin." Ken went up to the cab, then came back with some lace-up leather boots and held them out. "I hope these fit you, Johnson. They're Billy's boots."

Richard immediately noticed all the sharp nail spikes on the bottom. "What the hell are these?"

"They're corks!" replied Richard, then picked up the giant chainsaw. "You two men stay here with Tucker." Richard started working his way up the hill through some thick brush. A high-pitched roar ended the silence of a beautiful morning and started the beginning of a hard-ass workday. The chainsaw stopped, and the sound of a wedge being pounded into an eighty-foot-tall Douglas fir followed. "Timber!" Bellowed out through the tall bitterbrush, followed by a loud popping of wood. The old tree came crashing down with branches snapping and dust flying.

"Wow, this is going to be dangerous!" CP told Richard with an adrenaline rush.

Within the hour, three more trees fell, all in the same direction. Tucker jumped from the truck and ran toward Ken when he emerged from the brush with the chainsaw bar resting on his shoulder.

By noon, Richard learned what nubbin was all about. If he didn't get the limbs nubbed off flush to the tree trunk, a tree could hang up while skidding them across the forest floor. A snapped choker cable could slice a man in half! Ken pointed out two limbs that Richard hadn't nubbed close enough to the trunk. There was no need to explain about the corks. Without them walking up and down, a fallen tree would be dangerous—especially while running a razor-sharp chainsaw.

Precisely at two o'clock, Kenneth blasted the air horn on the log truck and yelled. "We've got to shut down. Fire level four rules."

Back on the deck of the A-frame, Richard drank water from a quart jar and gulped down an egg salad sandwich in less than two

minutes. He wouldn't comment on how good the potato salad was. However, the homemade apple pie was so good that he couldn't help but comment. "This pie is delicious."

"Thanks, I'll let the wife know."

"Tell your wife those breakfast burritos and cinnamon rolls were good, too," CP added to the small talk.

"I'll tell her. She knows how to spice up venison just right."

Richard quit eating apple pie. "That was deer meat in those burritos this morning?"

"Yes, sir, Johnson. Wait till you get a taste of her Elk steaks," Ken said with pride.

CP's stomach felt uneasy. He didn't want to know where the eggs for the egg salad sandwiches came from.

"Were those fresh eggs?" Richard asked.

"Yep, we raise Rhode Island Reds. They're good layers and good poultry."

"That's what my mother raised when I was a boy. Buckeye hens are good dual-purpose birds, also." Richard said and reflected on the past.

"Don't know about the Buckeyes," Ken replied

"I noticed you got a broken window," CP offered, hoping to get off all the chicken and venison conversation.

"Yep, I shot the window out." Ken looked over at the front of the A-frame. "The bees built a nest inside. That's why you can't sleep in there. I'm lergic to bees."

"You're allergic to bees, and you work in the woods?" CP asked.

"Yep, logging's all I know. Got to take my chances with the bees." Ken answered.

Richard looked at the shot-out window and noticed bees flying in and out of the cabin. "Why did you shoot out the window?"

"I shot at a one-eyed Eagle up in that there snag that was staring at me." Richard pointed at the old snag about twenty feet out from the deck.

"Aren't Eagles on the endangered species list?" CP asked.

"Don't know, don't care." Ken relied as he turned. "See you two at six tomorrow morning." Kenneth walked toward the truck with Tucker at his heels.

CP looked over at Richard. "I guess we know why we're not sleeping in the cabin."

"Yeah, I know," Richard solemnly replied, "I was just thinking about Jabbar—a stray bullet killed him."

Chap 22——————Blessed are the poor in Spirit

Thank you, God, Patty said every day before she sat down at her small desk in the hallway. Just a few months ago, she filled out job applications at fast-food restaurants, and now she was the executive assistant to the Vice President of Trask Inc. She hardly got through her morning prayer when the button on the desk phone flashed; it was from Condi's extension. Patty pushed the flashing button and picked up the phone. "Good morning, Condi."

"Patty, could you come down here when you get a chance?"

"Is it important, or can I go through my inbox and check phone messages first?"

"No, when you get a chance. I got you an American Express card that you can charge up to ten thousand dollars without having to go through the hassle of getting a check cut or a purchase order number."

"Thanks, Condi," Patty replied while looking at her yellow notepad. "I don't think I'll need that high a credit limit."

"You will if CP flies home every other weekend from Oregon. It's the limit, Kevin suggested."

"Okay, I'll be down after I get some items checked off." Patty was staring at a Post-it stuck to her desk lamp.

"Patty, you can pick up the credit card this afternoon. We have to review several background checks for potential attorneys by two. I left a note on your lamp."

"I'm reading it right now," Patty replied. "I'll see you at two." She hung up and booted the tower computer under her desk.

Getting a few more chairs filled for Senator Byron Shepard's fundraiser was high on her list. The union contract negotiations and the need to address the lawsuit about brake light failures on trailers were also crucial. CP had shared privately his thoughts about the wiring harnesses imported from China. Patty was gathering reliability data for the spreadsheet Condi was putting together.

One of the brake-light accidents resulted in a fatality. Another accident disabled a child about the same age as Condi's son. When

she heard the words 'Collateral Damage' made by the Trask Insurance company adjuster, it made her sick to her stomach. Deep down, Condi hoped that Trask Inc. would lose the lawsuit and that the award would be fair.

Taking the stairs two at a time was always a dead giveaway. Patty waited for five minutes before heading to Kevin's office. Getting coffee wasn't in her job description, but it was a tool that kept Kevin silent as she went down his to-do list.

Kevin took the steaming cup of coffee, leaned back in his chair, and said, "Okay, let me have it."

Patty started reading off her yellow notepad. "Production numbers are down. I think the slowdown is going to continue until the union contract is settled."

"I wish we could prove that," Kevin replied as he sipped coffee.

"Well, you could make a case that the three days after you conducted your safety meeting were the highest production numbers for the month."

"Why would a safety meeting cause that?" Kevin asked.

"It could be because the workers saw that you were concerned about their health and well-being."

"Maybe it was because we gave them cake and Gus the new three-wheeler?" Kevin questioned Patty.

"Not sure, but we could have another meeting and see if the numbers go up," Patty suggested. "I'm taking the Abraham Maslow Hierarchy of Needs course this semester. I see a lot of basic needs not being addressed in the current union contract."

"And what demands would those be?" Kevin asked, now irritated.

"The basic need of self-worth through employment. Unlike you, Kevin, every man and woman down in the plant needs work. Every day, the news has another story about outsourcing. They're afraid of losing their jobs!"

"I get that. But what can I do? I could be standing in the unemployment line with all of them, too. Mr. Hung Meng put my family in a bad spot with the deal he made with my dad before I came on board."

"Kevin, your family will never be poor! Maybe you'll only get ten million after the land sale, but you'll never be in an unemployment line." Patty wished she hadn't commented.

"Whatever," Kevin quipped

"The second big item that you need to get out in front of is the pending lawsuit where a family crashed into the back of one of Trask's cargo trailers." Patty looked up from her notes.

"How do you know about that?"

"Condi asked me to have CP check on the models with the imported wiring harness and brake lights not working from China."

"Is there any connection between Hung Meng's import business and those wiring harnesses?" Kevin asked.

"I don't think so, but I can look into it," Patty answered. "CP knows all about the aluminum wiring and crimp connections. I can ask him when he calls from Oregon tonight."

"Thanks," Kevin set the coffee cup down. "Did anyone get injured in that accident?"

"Yes, a child about the age of Condi's son ended up in a wheelchair."

"Permanently?" Kevin asked timidly. "Was it a girl or a boy?"

"I'm not sure about the exact details. Condi would know more. She's keeping a special folder on all the accidents."

Kevin was silent for an extended period. "How many accidents?"

Now, Patty was silent. I might have slipped up. Kevin might not have any of the details.

"What else should I know?" Kevin fumed.

"Ah… She is compiling a reliability spreadsheet for the imported wiring harnesses. You do know there's been more than one accident?"

Kevin didn't reply. He set down his coffee, walked past Patty, then went down the stairs and asked for the folder. At first, Condi acted dumbfounded about collecting any data; finally, she pulled the plain manila folder from the back of her lower desk drawer.

Back in his office, Kevin reviewed the report and pictures from a private investigation firm. One photo showed a father carrying out a six-pack of beer from a convenience store. Across the photograph, written with a black marker: Larence Shultz—Ann Marie's dad.

Kevin put two and two together. He never wanted the VP position and now hated the Trask name even more!

He rushed down the stairs, hurried by Condi, and went directly into the vast office. "What the fuck!" Kevin shouted as the door slammed.

Condi heard the WTF through the solid wood doors. She heard her name mentioned! The shouting match and family dispute behind closed doors lasted only a few minutes. Kevin bolted out of the massive office, holding the manila folder, and went directly to the parking lot. From Kevin's facial expression, Gus swiftly raised the gate. He sensed that this was not the time to discuss basketball with Kevin.

Driving over one hundred miles an hour on Interstate 5 was irresponsible and suicidal. Kevin's mind raged just as hard as the V12 under the hood. God, for whatever reason, a child ended up maimed because of a Trask. How can I make this right? I'm so sorry for all the trouble my family has caused. Take me if…

Ahead, traffic was at a stop! For a brief moment, Kevin didn't react. The brake pedal was solid, clunking, and shaking. The Mercedes came to a controlled stop inches from the back of a semi-truck. Then smoke came from all four tires. The anti-lock brake system worked as designed.

Now stuck in traffic and needing to talk with someone, Kevin took the handset from the bag and dialed. "Tina, I need to share some upsetting family history."

"Kevin, like I'm so glad that you called," Tina immediately started with her story. "I'm moving up to San Jose. I got a high-up position at a Y2K anti-virus company."

"I thought you were looking for modeling work around San Diego?"

"Yeah, but like, San Diego is so boring, and like all the action is up in Silicon Valley."

"What's the name of the company?" Kevin asked. "Did you say Y2K?"

"A like… It's a new startup company. There's no name yet." Tina lied.

"Y2K?" Kevin paused, "I have heard that acronym before."

"Yeah, like it's the big computer virus coming January first, year two thousand."

"How do you know all this?" Kevin was confounded; Tina didn't even know how to reboot a computer.

"A tall Korean guy told me. He knows a lot about techie stuff." Tina didn't want to offer anything more about Chan or Tim.

"Who told you that?"

"Like, you said something about upsetting news?" Tina knew not to bring up Tim Baylor's name.

"I found out today that our faulty trailer lights might have caused a serious injury to a child."

"Your family has insurance and all… Don't you?"

"Of course, we have insurance. But our insurance company is fighting the claim. They hired a private eye up in Michigan to prove that the child's father has a drinking problem. They're also claiming something about a child booster seat being outdated."

"Shit happens, Kevin. You need to grow up." Tina replied.

"How can you say that?" Kevin's tone turned sour.

"There are winners and losers in this world. A big part of your problem is that you don't associate yourself with the winners. I'm a winner per…" Tina almost blurted Myung Chan.

"Tina, I've got to go!" Kevin threw the handset onto the passenger seat and picked up the manila folder, looking over more of the evidence. Traffic inched forward a few feet, then stopped again. I should go to Grandpa's church and light a candle for the Shultz family. Maybe see a priest.

It was closing time when Patty heard the Italian dress shoes taking the stairs two at a time. Kevin rounded the corner and made a beeline for her. "Patty, could you get me airline tickets and a room overnight in Lansing, Michigan?"

"When and for how long?" Patty asked as she took off her jacket and sat back down.

"How about Tuesday and Wednesday next week?" Kevin answered. "Make the arrangements on Monday when you get into work." Kevin went to his office and stood at the one-way mirrored glass, watching all the workers close their toolboxes, grab lunch pails, and high-five each other as they exited the building.

Maybe Tina is right? 'Shit happens.' I need to work harder at being a winner… If the plant gets shut down, I can't worry about it. I need to be done with all of this and move on…

There was a knock on the door. Patty read from her notepad. "Kevin, I can get you a flight departing LAX at 7:20 am on Tuesday and arriving in Lansing at 2:50 pm. The latest return flight out of Ohio is on Wednesday at 8:02 pm."

Kevin turned. "Book those flights."

Patty returned to her desk, took the travel agent off hold, and booked the flights in first class. She waited for the itinerary and tickets to arrive via fax. Her newly issued American Express card worked without a problem. The last-minute flights and lodging cost over $5,000. One quarter of the cost to fly the corporate jet.

Kevin looked up from his desk when Patty came in with the paperwork. "You didn't have to work late. You could have waited to make my travel arrangements on Monday."

"That's not a good idea; I waited too long to book CP's flight. Now, he's staying up in Oregon over the weekend."

"So, he's not playing basketball on Sunday?"

"CP told me to tell you to go on up there and meet the guys. He said that you probably won't get any game time, but you could meet his bros."

"I'm not going up there alone," Kevin mumbled. "Yikes, Gus was really counting on watching a basketball game."

"I know," Patty replied while slipping on her jacket. "I'll explain the situation to him before I catch the bus." Patty went down the stairs and left the building.

At the window, Kevin watched her walk across the parking lot toward the guard shack. Impulsively, he grabbed his keys and bolted down the stairs! Patty was talking with Gus when he pulled up to the guard shack.

Gus was rocking side to side, chiming out, "Okay, no basketball. Okay, no basketball. Okay, no basketball."

Kevin got out of the car and approached. "Gus, I'm sorry for the confusion. Let's plan on watching basketball together. I'll pick you up at noon just like we planned."

Gus quit listing from side to side and replied. "Okay, Mr. Kevin Trask. Remember, church is over at ten forty-five. I'll be ready at noon."

"Hop in, I'll give you a ride home," Kevin told Patty.

"Thanks, I missed the bus."

Gus went into the guard shack, lifted the gate, and waved until they exited the parking lot.

"You live up in Inglewood, correct?" Kevin quantified as they started down Navy Way Road.

"Yeah, but I'm staying at CP's place when he's up in Oregon," Patty replied. "You can drop me off at my parents and then one of them can run me up to Glendale."

"I can take you to Glendale, it's just across the I-5 from my parents' place." It was the usual Friday night bumper-to-bumper traffic. The conversation shifted from work-related topics to the on-again, off-again relationship with Tina, and then to persuading Gus to relocate off-site. By the time they got to CP's townhouse, Patty had agreed to watch the city league basketball game and talk more with Gus about moving.

Saturday morning, Kevin intentionally avoided going to the main house or to the back patio by the pool. The entire insurance-and-private-eye episode in Michigan turned his stomach. It seemed so wrong, even for his father. The plan to drive down to San Diego and go to lunch with Tina wasn't going to happen either; she hadn't returned his calls. Kevin decided to do one thing that he rarely did—visit Grandpa Trask's gravesite.

Sunday morning, Patty was watching through the blinds; the Land Rover pulled into CP's parking spot directly in front of the townhouse, and she grabbed the jersey and headed out the door. "I remembered driving this SUV," Patty said when she pulled herself into the passenger seat.

"Yeah, that was the night I drank too many margaritas, and you drove me home," Kevin answered. "I hope that Gus is home from church."

Patty tossed the Jersey onto the center console. "CP said to wear his Sparks jersey. Just in case you need to fill in for him. You'll need a Jersey."

"How's CP and Richard Johnson doing up there clearing trees and all?"

"CP loves it. He's been running logs to a mill in Warm Springs. Next week, Officer Bull Elk Whitefoot is helping him obtain a CDL for Oregon and the Reservation. Not exactly sure what that's all about."

"A CDL is a commercial driver's license. The Rez refers to the Warm Springs Reservation. They have their own law and regulations."

"Well, anyway, CP said that it reminds him of building air strips during Desert Storm." Patty pulled the seatbelt across her waist and chest. Kevin noticed how it parted her firm breasts; the pink athletic shorts showed off her muscular legs.

"You smell good this morning," Kevin said as he backed up.

"Thanks," Patty waved at one of the townhouse neighbors.

"What about Richard Johnson? Did CP say anything about how he was doing?"

"I think the first day, Mr. Johnson wanted to kick Mr. Saxton's ass or something. But Mr. Johnson's back hurt so bad from nubbin logs that never happened. I guess Richard can hardly stand up straight; he moans every day he gets out of the bunk."

"Wow, I wonder what nubbin is all about?"

"I can find out from Lilly if you want. She's really close to her dad." Patty was curious herself.

"Yeah, why don't you chat with Lilly? I don't want to be responsible for a big brawl between Richard and Kenneth!" Kevin replied with concern.

Gus locked up and hurried from the southwest corner apartment toward the guard shack. Kevin put the Range Rover in reverse, made a 180, and backed up to the orange drop gate. Gus got into the backseat, opened and shut the door twice just to be safe.

"Fasten your seatbelt, Gus," Patty said, looking over her shoulder and smiling at Gus. She noticed Gus didn't have his security cap on; he had an LA Lakers ball cap on.

Kevin waited until he heard the seatbelt click before putting the Range Rover in gear. Kevin looked at Gus in the rearview mirror. "How was church this morning?"

"Oh, it was good, Mr. Kevin Trask. The Pastor talked about how Jesus forgave the man on the cross and told him he would be in paradise that same day."

"And where do you think paradise is?" Kevin asked.

"It is where my mom is! Jesus took her to paradise on the day I was born." Gus's direct and sincere answer cast a solemn mood over the ride to the rec center.

The Poinsettia Rec-Center was not as depraved as CP had made it out to be. Although it was in the older section of LA, there were no signs of gang activity, and only a few buildings had been tagged with graffiti. The inside basketball court was small. The bleachers were only three rows deep and backed up to cinder block walls. The out-of-place trio spotted the team wearing Sparks jerseys and went to that side of the gymnasium.

The tallest player on the team ran over as the trio sat down at the end of the bleachers. "CP told me to look for you," said the six-foot-six black beanpole.

"You must be Sonny." Kevin gave a thumb-up.

"Call me coach. You can shoot around with us before the game. I doubt that you will get any game time."

"That would be great!" Kevin leaped from the third row and strutted to the top of the key. It took some time before anyone passed Kevin the ball. Finally, he got the ball and drove the key for an easy layup. The pregame shoot-around turned into resentment toward Kevin. Perhaps it was because he was white, or maybe because he was wearing his Duke Basketball jersey, or perhaps because of all the years of private coaching.

What raised Kevin's intensity level was that he was still pissed about the way Trask Inc. was dealing with the brake light problem and couldn't get it out of his head.

The game began, and Kevin returned to the third row, leaning back against the cool cinder block wall. Gus was zoned, rocking forward and backward between Kevin and Patty. Every time the Sparks took a shot and missed, Gus would say, "No-share, no-look, or no-pass." His voice was loud and annoying. It would have been better if Gus spoke when the Sparks scored, but he only spoke when they missed a scoring opportunity.

By halftime, the Sparks were down by sixteen points! Sonny had caught on to what Gus was doing and told Kevin to put on the jersey that Patty had draped over her bare legs. Kevin pulled off his Duke jersey, put on CP's jersey, and jumped from the bench onto the floor. Sonny sat down next to Gus, looked at Patty's tanned, muscular legs, and smiled at her. Patty used the Duke Jersey to cover her legs.

No one would pass the ball to Kevin; this only added to the rage inside his gut. Kevin watched for an opportunity; he stole the ball and drove the entire length of the court for a layup. Gus didn't say a word. Patty was the only one to let out a small cheer. The next opportunity came from a rebound; Kevin drove the court and passed the ball around his back. The Sparks player pulled up and shot for a three-pointer. The ball missed the rim and the backboard. Gus said, "No share".

Kevin's passing and assists became a tremendous asset; by the third period, the Sparks were only down by ten. Sonny wasn't paying that much attention to Kevin; he was catching on to Gus's basketball formula and realized it wasn't about the players scoring points, but about egotism that caused the team to miss a shot. Sonny retrieved his clipboard and asked Gus to start charting the statistics.

Gus drew out four columns and then wrote down each player's number from his memory. In the second column, he wrote no-share, the third column for no-look, and the last column for no-pass. Gus then started checking off every missed shot. With less than a minute left in the game, the Sparks were within four points. Kevin stole the ball and drove the entire court for a slam dunk. The ball bounced high off the back of the rim and went out of bounds. Gus marked Kevin down for a no-share.

The other team inbounded, worked the clock down to ten seconds, and shot a three-pointer. The Sparks inbounded, passed the ball back and forth, and then missed the final shot with 2 seconds left on the clock. Gus charted that player in the no-look column.

Kevin trotted to the bench, pulled off the Sparks jersey, and threw it up against the cinder wall. Sonny looked up from the clipboard and said, "What the hell are you upset about. We have never come within fifteen points of beating this team."

"We should have won!" Kevin spouted back at Sonny, sitting up in the third row with Patty and Gus.

"That's correct, Mr. Kevin Trask. You had four no-shares and two no-looks, that's why the Sparks lost." Gus spoke up and then pointed at the chart he had made.

Players approached high-fiving and backslapping Kevin. There was no white-guys can't play ball rhetoric.

Sonny nonchalantly took the clipboard from Gus and turned it over. It was evident that Gus had a formula that could transform how coaching was done. The formula was simple; it had nothing to do with winning—it was about humility and freedom from pride.

"It was a close game," Patty said as she went to retrieve the sweaty Jersey from the floor.

Kevin's head poked out from the Blue Devil athletic jersey. "Sorry about throwing the shirt. I just needed to vent out some anger."

"I know how frustrating losing is."

Kevin felt her sincerity. "Would you like to stop at my favorite fish and chips place on the way home?"

"Sure, that sounds good."

Kevin turned toward Gus. "How about you, Mr. assistant coach, are you up for Fish and Chips?"

"Maybe if they have orange soda to drink?" Gus was fixated on his player efficiency report, which Sonny was now securing.

Sonny half looked up from the clipboard. "Gus, how about I keep your report until next week?"

Gus stiffened up! The words 'keep' and 'next week' were two actions that he wasn't expecting.

"Patty understood the no reaction and lightly gripped Gus's hand. If they don't have orange soda, I'm sure they have root beer."

Kevin winked at Patty, then looked at Gus. "You can get your game stats next week. Sonny wants to share them."

"Okay, Mr. Sonny." Gus was happy to share his charting.

"Mr. Kevin Trask. My dad sometimes took me to Fish and Chips after church. They always had orange pop."

Patty pulled Gus out ahead. "I noticed a vending machine in the lobby when we came in. Maybe they have orange pop in it."

Patty was digging in her purse when Kevin approached from behind. "Hey, they have orange Gatorade. I'll have one too." She put in some coins, and the plastic bottle made a loud thump when it dropped into the catch tray.

"Thank you, Ms. Patty Kelly," Gus said with genuine appreciation as she dug in her purse for more change. Gus pulled a football-shaped plastic coin holder from his pocket. He squeezed the ends, and it opened up. He took out four quarters and handed them to Kevin. "It's my turn."

The restaurant was not as crowded as it had been the last time Kevin was there with Lilly. There was no live country music blaring out from the bar. Sunday was family night, much quieter than the no-cover-charge for cowgirls Friday night. Kevin asked Gus where he learned to compile basketball statistics, and that question turned into a full-on conversation.

The restaurant was closer to CP's townhouse, but Patty suggested that Kevin drop off Gus first. After weeks of working with Kevin, she knew it was time to share something intimate with Kevin. After they parked in front of the townhouse, she reached over and put her hand on Kevin's hand. "Kevin, I think it's time that we share something."

Kevin glanced over at Patty and quietly replied, "Okay."

"Kevin, I know most of your life you have been sheltered. And you don't like it when I say privileged, but it is part of who you are. Maybe you are a little shy, and we come from different backgrounds, but I want to share something with you that is very personal."

"Okay," Kevin said for a second time.

"When my twin sister Cecilia died from painkillers due to breast cancer, I was sort of where you are at right now. I was angry at my parents for not having good medical insurance. I was angry at the doctors and the hospital because they wouldn't try the latest experimental cancer treatments. But… most of all I was angry at God."

"Patty, I am angry! My dad thinks a girl who got crippled is just the price of doing business. The insurance company calls it

collateral damage, and when I talked to Tina about it, she just said, shit happens."

Patty tensed up; she didn't care for Tina. Thinking that Cecelia's life was defined by the two words 'shit happens' made her like Tina even less. "Kevin, things happen for a reason. It's a test of your inner Spirit."

"Well, I don't like it! So, I must have a weak Spirit. The sooner I'm out of this whole Trask family fiasco, the better." Kevin took a deep breath. "As for the Spirit, where was it when Benny died up at Shasta Lake. What about Gus's mother? She died giving birth! What about his father?"

"Kevin, I know how you feel. I was so mad at my parents about the lame insurance coverage they had that I didn't talk to them for over a year. Then I went on this self-destructive course, blaming God for everything. If God wouldn't even heal my twin sister, I didn't want anything to do with him."

"Well, what changed you? I see you praying at your desk in the morning all the time."

"Kevin, that trip up to Shasta Lake. That night on the top deck of the Stargazer, something just came over me, and I just put everything in God's hands. I was so tired of being a tramp, drinking, not caring, and effacing my name."

"I have never thought of you that way," Kevin replied with sincerity.

"I know Kevin, and after that night, when I put it all into His hands, was when you came into my life."

"That's how I feel about you. It feels like more than a coincidence," Kevin immediately replied. "The mother-hen thing is not meant to be a mean. You always have my back, and I love you for that."

Patty unfastened her seatbelt and leaned over and kissed Kevin on the cheek. "I love you too."

As Patty climbed out of the Land Rover, Kevin said. "I'm not coming into work tomorrow. I need to get ready to fly to Michigan to show some Trask humility to the Shultz family. Let my dad know. I'll call you when I land on Tuesday."

"I'll let Mr. Trask know in the morning. Godspeed—" Patty shut the passenger door.

Chap 23————Payback is Hell

Private-eye work was something Kevin was ready to cross off his list for a career change. After three hours of sitting in the rain in a rental car, he was done with this type of work. The plywood ramp over the porch stairs, along with the van with a smashed-up front end, parked at the curb, was a sure bet that he was staking out the right house. One casual stroll up and back in front of the house confirmed the insurance report; it was correct. The tires on the caravan were almost bald, and Kevin didn't notice a child booster car seat inside. Kevin wanted to lift the curbside garbage container lid and look for beer cans, but couldn't bring himself to go that far in violating someone's privacy.

When the short yellow bus pulled up, the driver got out and helped a petite girl with a walker to the wet, rain-puddled dirt driveway. The stakeout caused more heartache than impatience. Kevin almost got sick to his stomach, watching the tiny child work the walker up the plywood ramp and into the house. Ann Marie was her name—Kevin knew it from the folder that Condi had been keeping about the bald tires, wrong type child booster seat, and drunk driving accusations. It took another forty-five minutes for Kevin to knock on the door. A young boy pulled open the door. Kevin bent over and asked, "Is your mom or dad here?"

"Mom, a man wants you," the boy yelled back into the small house.

A short, dark-haired woman holding a baby came to the door. "Can I help you?"

"I'm the Vice President of Trask Trailers and was hoping that we could talk." This was the first time that Kevin had ever introduced himself as Vice President.

It only took a few seconds before the young mother invited Kevin in out of the rain. She handed the baby to Kevin and cleared some laundry off the couch for a place to sit. Kevin's knees were shaking, and he hoped that he wouldn't faint with the baby in his arms. Ann Marie worked her walker over next to the couch and asked, "What's your name?"

"My name is Kevin Trask."

There was the sound of a bedroom door opening, followed by a toilet flush. A thin, wiry guy with disheveled hair and a scraggly

beard came out into the front room. He looked directly at Kevin, holding his child.

"It's Mr. Kevin Trask," Ann Marie said while looking up at her dad.

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Early the following morning, Kevin called Patty to make departure arrangements from Lansing, Michigan. Somehow, the word about Kevin settling the brake light problem had leaked around the assembly line. The leak probably originated from the day Kevin stormed into Robert Trask's office and had the WTF screaming match. It didn't matter. The rumor was that Trask Inc. won the lawsuit and that the Union Contract was back on the table.

Patty was under another deadline, so Condi agreed to help her fill seats at the Senator Byron Shepard fundraiser. Robert Trask backed out and had given a definite 'No' since the WTF argument. Neither he nor his wife would be attending.

It was a last-minute request, but Gus was always more than thrilled to have Ali overnight. Reading superhero comic books to a six-year-old, eating hot dogs, and having ice cream always sent Gus to a state of heightened happiness. Condi rented the 'Toy Story' video, knowing that Gus would watch it at least three times with Ali.

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Kevin hit the stairs two at a time. From the top landing, he stopped and told Patty to grab her notepad. He waited, and after she went through the door, he closed it. "We need to schedule a meeting ASAP with the Trask insurance company."

"No problem." Patty wrote on her notepad. "Who else should be at this meeting?"

"My Dad, Condi, Mr. Hung Meng, Myung Chan, and you. The Trask insurance adjusters and absolutely no lawyers," Kevin paced while Patty wrote.

"Okay, I'll get on it right away." Patty felt a new sense of leadership in Kevin's tone.

"What else happened when I was gone?" Kevin asked.

"Well, your father has refused to go to the Senator's fundraiser. Condi has agreed to go with her mom and fill two chairs."

"Good," Kevin replied. "So, I'll be the only one there without a date," Kevin mumbled to himself.

"One good thing is that on this Wednesday and Thursday, we set a record for production. Wednesday, we were seventeen units over norm, and yesterday, we were twenty-one units over."

Kevin sat in the office chair. "What do you think caused the spike in production?"

"Ah… I'm not sure? I'd have to think on it," Patty hemmed and hawed.

"Patty, I know you better than that. What do you think caused the increase in production?"

"Okay, a rumor got out, and it wasn't from me, but everyone in the plant thinks you are going to quit using the wiring harnesses from China. They know you went to Michigan to talk to the Schulz family and think you have their backs and will quit outsourcing."

"Oh…" Kevin leaned forward and picked up the production spreadsheet on his desk. He remained silent as he studied the numbers.

"I need to set up a meeting," Patty said and left the office.

Kevin got up and stood at the one-way mirrored window. There was a noticeable increase in productivity on the assembly line. A critical condition of the Hung Meng land sale contract was that production numbers were to increase by a factor of two. The union contract was a different story. Kevin spent the next two hours going over every demand and highlighted the ones that could be negotiated.

Patty knocked on the door and entered the office. "Mr. Hung Meng will be in the Middle East starting Monday next week. The following week, Myung Chan will be in Thailand for three days. The soonest we can have a meeting with everyone is two weeks from today."

Kevin looked up from the twenty-two-page document. "That sounds good, set it up for Friday, two weeks from today," Kevin replied, and then went back to the Union Contract.

"I almost forgot." Patty interrupted Kevin's concentration. "Sonny, the coach of CP's basketball team, called and wants to make sure that you will be there on Sunday."

"But I'll be driving home from Sacramento on Sunday. Ah… I don't know if…"

Patty interrupted again, "This Sunday the game is at four, and if you leave Sacramento by nine, you will have plenty of time to make the game."

"That sounds good. Call him back and let him know that I'm planning on being there."

"There is one more thing," Patty injected. "Sonny wants to know if we will bring Gus again to take game stats."

Kevin looked confused. "So let me get this straight. You and I are driving up to the fundraiser tomorrow. Condi is driving up with her mom. CP's is driving down from Oregon and…"

"I made you a schedule." Patty handed Kevin a detailed trip planner.

Kevin began reviewing the schedule, which included breaks for coffee and the bathroom. "If we did pick up Gus, what time do we need to leave Sacramento?" Kevin asked.

"I have that alternate trip schedule on the back," Patty answered.

Kevin flipped the card over. "Okay, let's go with this schedule and pick up Gus to chart the game stats. Let Sonny know that I'll be at the game with Gus."

"I will do that." Patty turned to leave. When she reached the door, she had to ask one last thing that had been eating at her all week. "Lilly Saxton offered to ride down with CP and fill that last contributor's chair tomorrow. Since it's paid for and all, it would be a shame to waste the thousand-dollar-per-plate fee."

Kevin was totally caught off guard and finally replied, "If Lilly wants to ride down with CP, that's fine by me."

Yes, Patty thought, fighting to hold back glee.

Kevin set the trip planner card aside and picked up the union contract. Patty went back to her desk, dialed long distance, and spoke in a quiet voice.

Thirty minutes later, Lilly and Mary were headed into Portland to go shopping—it was the prom dress shopping that they had never experienced.

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Saturday morning, Kevin picked up his tux from the dry cleaners and headed to the Country Club. Some practice was in order before the four o'clock game on Sunday. After some layups, lots of shots from past the three-point line, and ten free throws in a row, he headed for the showers. He paused at the oak bench where Robert had slapped him across the face at the beginning of summer. The whole spiel about being born into affluence and being the kings of commerce was holding true.

Three months ago, Kevin would have never flown back to Michigan to make a deal. When he exited through the Pasadena Country Club lobby in a tuxedo, Kevin held his head high—he was learning to like the feeling of kingship.

When Patty came out of the townhouse with her hair up in a blue strapless full-length dress, Kevin couldn't help himself. "You look hot."

"Thank you, you look hot too, in your tux and all," Patty replied and then flashed a smile. "Where can I put my high heels and makeup kit?"

Kevin pulled the trunk lever. The trunk lid popped, and he trotted to the back of the SL600. "You can put that stuff in my gym bag."

When Patty bent forward, the open back of the dress displayed her Chinese dragon tattoo, and he reflected on the last time he remembered seeing the tattoo, up at Shasta Lake, when all she had on was a bikini. "Do you want me to put up the top so as not to mess up your hair?"

"No, I can fix it in our room when I do Lilly's hair. I built forty-five minutes of prep into our trip planner."

"Oh," Kevin replied, somewhat dazed, "So, Lilly is riding down with CP?"

"Yep… She even went out and bought a new dress."

"For a stupid fundraiser?" Kevin asked.

"Fundraiser and dance!" Patty answered. "I'll be right back! I got to get CP's dress blues."

"Did the Senator's event coordinator suggest the military uniform?"

"No, but she strongly hinted that it was more than acceptable attire for a political event." Patty walked back through the front door, grabbed the uniform, black shoes, and an overnight bag, and hurried to the open trunk. "We'd better hit the road. We're already five minutes behind schedule."

"Okay, you're in charge." Kevin shut the trunk and hurried to hold the passenger door open. Patty hiked the dress so as not to sit on it and carefully lowered herself into the leather seat.

"Why are your legs shiny?"

"I had them waxed this morning."

"Is that why your back is shiny too?"

In a defensive tone, Patty answered, "My back didn't need waxing. I rubbed lotion on my tattoo to make the colors stand out."

"Sorry!" Kevin was careful not to shut the blue dress in the passenger door.

Kevin is so naïve. Maybe if he weren't an only child or had a sister, he wouldn't be so girl-dumb. But Lilly is naive too… The conversation eventually turned to why the Chinese dragon tattoo. The tattoo was out of respect for her grandmother; what Kevin wasn't expecting was an in-depth lesson on Chinese history.

The Tiananmen Square protests, commonly known in China as the June Fourth Incident, occurred when Kevin was in high school. He did remember the leaked video of the one lone student kneeling before a row of tanks. Nobody around the world was aware that just the day before, over seven hundred innocent students and civilians were murdered in Beijing. That was what the kneeling man was protesting. The Chinese eye-opening history lesson was condensed into a two-hour lecture passed on to Patty by her grandmother, who had lived during Communist China's suppression of free speech. Kevin was mentally fatigued by the time they pulled under the Hotel's awning.

When CP emerged from the lobby, Patty sprang out of the passenger seat and ran to him. The strong hug and extended kiss were evident that their relationship was beyond just friends. Lilly stood just outside the sliding doors, feeling like the third wheel. She observed Kevin remove high heels from a gym bag. I wonder if I'm supposed to wear those? I'll trip. Oh… He looks like a dignitary in his tux. I shouldn't be here.

The doorman approached and loaded the overnight stuff onto a hotel cart. Kevin walked directly to Lilly. "Thanks for coming down and filling that last chair for this event tonight."

"You're welcome." Lilly could barely squeeze out the two words.

"I hope you don't get bored. There will be numerous self-righteous speeches."

"I've never been to anything like this."

"Prepare yourself for a bunch of kiss ass pretentiousness that will have you looking for the exit. But on the upside, the food and music are usually good," Kevin said while handing the valet a tip.

"I already checked in and have a dress up in my room," Lilly said, wishing she hadn't given in to Patty's insistence.

CP approached and slapped Kevin on the back. "Hey, Bro, don't try to ace me out or one-up me."

Kevin grinned, unsure where the conversation was headed.

"Sonny, let me know that you're a good fit on the team. He said your skills are not as good as mine, but for a whiteboy you got game." CP beamed while displaying perfect white teeth.

Lilly stepped back and tightly closed her lips. I hate my hillbilly teeth!

"Well, I shot some balls this morning at the club. Hopefully, tomorrow I'll be playing up to your level for the Sunday afternoon game." Kevin returned a bullshit smile.

"I'll go change into my dress blues and meet you in the bar." CP grabbed the garment bag and Patty's overnight case off the luggage cart.

"We will see you two in forty-five minutes," Patty said, grabbing Lilly's hand and pulling her through the door and toward the front desk. "There should be three rooms for Trask Inc. One room is for Lilly Saxton."

"Yes, ma'am, I'll have her things brought up to the room." The desk clerk motioned to an evening gown and a suitcase behind the counter.

On the elevator, Patty punched in numbers. From behind, Lilly was still holding back a smile and wishing that she hadn't agreed to come to the fundraiser. Her dress wasn't like Patty's because she didn't have the boobs to hold it up. The red push-up bra and lace panties that her mom insisted she buy were the first items she had ever purchased from Victoria's Secret.

Patty opened room 223 and quickly darted into the bathroom. When she came out, she said, "I should have scheduled more than two pee stops." She walked between the queen beds, picked up the phone, and dialed room 335. "CP, could you bring my makeup case to room two two three?"

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CP and Kevin were sitting at the bar when a hush came over the quaint drinking area. They both spun their stools at the same time. In the doorway was Patty, wearing her long blue dress, a tight-fitting, open-front sequin blazer, and stilettos. Lilly's hair was pulled up on top of her head. Only shoestring straps covered her shoulders and upper torso. The long red split dress concealed white sandals, and the push-up bra was uncomfortable but worth it.

CP approached and cocked his arm while placing his hand just under a rack of medals on his dress blues. "May I escort you to the ball, young lady?"

"Yes, you may, Master Sergeant Charles Patrick Johnson," Patty said, then slipped her arm between his elbow and chest.

"Wow, you two look so cool. I need to get a picture." Lilly opened the small clutch purse and pulled out a disposable film camera.

Patty and CP walked arm in arm through the lobby and out the door. Kevin and Lilly followed at an arm's distance from each other.

Outside, CP rushed to get his pickup, while Kevin handed the valet twenty dollars.

"You're riding with Kevin," Patty said as she started to hike up her dress.

"I guess I'm riding with you," Lilly said to Kevin, now feeling underarm perspiration. I never should have come to this event. How am I going to get into the car without ripping this overpriced gown?

The valet pulled the SL600 in front, jumped out, quickly opened the passenger door, and darted off for another car.

Kevin took his place. Lilly followed with shaking knees and solid fear.

"Patty pulled her legs out from the slit before she sat down," Kevin said.

Lilly turned and pulled the red dress from the back, exposing her long legs.

"Grab my arm," Kevin offered, and then lowered her onto the seat.

"That worked," Lilly mumbled as she drew her legs in and flopped the dress across her lap.

"Do you wax your legs?" Kevin asked as he carefully shut the door.

"No, should I have?" Lilly felt ashamed.

"I don't know. Patty does to make her legs glossy."

"Women wax their legs to pull out the hair." Lilly chided.

"Ouch! That must hurt." Kevin started the car

"I don't know. I've never had it done."

"I don't blame you. Women go to a lot of trouble to go out and show off."

"We do… But I'm feeling out of place here. I hope that I don't embarrass you."

"Just don't fart out loud at the dinner table," Kevin joked.

The Crocker Art Center was only four blocks away, but Lilly was still laughing when they pulled up. CP was one car ahead. He left his truck running, hurried around to the passenger door, and Patty's legs swung out with the spiked stilettos. CP took her hands; it took a moment for her to steady herself, then she worked the dress down and around her legs.

Before Kevin had a chance to shut the car off, Lilly pulled herself up and out, worked the red dress down and around her legs. The valet took the keys. Then Kevin walked over to Lilly and took her hand. They got in line behind CP and Patty.

"This will be fun!" Patty stated. In contrast, Lilly wanted the fundraiser to be over.

Condi and her mother were already sitting at the round table and made plans to leave after dinner, possibly after two songs. Condi stood and waved the four over as they came up the stairs into the ballroom. "This is my mother, Ruth Johnson," Condi said, and then everyone introduced themselves around the reserved Trask Inc table.

"How is Richard doing up in Oregon?" Ruth immediately asked CP.

"I think he's getting the hang of using Richard's thirty-six-inch chainsaw. Being the nubber with a short twenty-inch bar was killing his back. Next week I'm going to show Rich how to operate the loader." CP gave Ruth a reassuring wink.

Lilly butted in, "I think Richard and my dad are going fishing tomorrow, after church. My mom was trying to get a ride to church so that they could go fishing early. I'm not sure that my mom found a ride to church, though."

Ruth's head was spinning; she'd only understood about one word of the logging terms. The fact that Richard would set foot in a church made her question their thirty-one years of marriage. For Condi, she didn't want to hear one word about her hypocritical Muslim father, who cheated with a white woman and practically disowned her when Ali was born, mixed race. Condi moved the

name cards on the table and then started a conversation about work and the pending union contract with Patty. CP and Kevin headed to the open bar, talking about basketball and the fact that they couldn't support the Los Angeles Rams after leaving LA and going to St Louis.

Patty flashed a smile of support across the table at Lilly, who didn't know what to expect. However, this formal event was no different from all the expectations and buildup for a senior prom; over half of the girls attended their senior prom with someone they wished had never asked them. But then Kevin didn't ask her; she was just a tag-along to fill an empty chair.

It didn't take long for the master of ceremonies to start with accolades from the podium in the center of the stage. The pitching for even more than the $1,000-a-plate fundraiser was followed by phony laughter and clapping. Senator Byron Shepard took the microphone and immediately jumped into his promise to represent the people and create jobs, reciting the same old, familiar rhetoric. When the senator started his 'Save the Trees' initiative, Lilly couldn't help herself; she called out the words, "It's all a bunch of bullshit!"

Her words weren't meant to carry any further than around the Trask Inc. table, but they did. The Senator lost his place on the teleprompter. "Excuse me, young lady, I didn't hear you." With years of political experience, he knew how to turn the words back on Lilly

The spotlight shifted from the Senator to Lilly's red face and now downturned head. She could barely get out the word, "Sorry."

A hush came over all the elite and mighty in attendance; all eyes were focused on the spotlighted Trask table. "Young lady, if you think cutting down all the trees is a good thing, I'd like to hear your rebuttal." The Senator was skilled at debating and was ready to bury Lilly and win support.

Mrs. Johnson leaned over and whispered into Lilly's ear. "Stand up, young lady, and speak your peace." Ruth felt the fear radiating from someone who felt way out of her place among society's privileged and elite.

The spotlight pinpointed on one of the few black women in the ballroom as Ruth rose from her chair. "This young lady is from a family of loggers up in Oregon. The only thing her family knows is cutting down trees! So why would you expect her to like your no-cutting-of-trees policy and putting people out of work?"

Senator Shepard felt a trap being set. A black woman asking a question about putting people out of work could cost votes. But he was a skilled orator. "Thank you, Mrs., or is it Miss? I don't see a husband. Unless that man in uniform is your husband."

"It's Mrs. Ruth Johnson! My husband is currently logging in Oregon. This is my nephew Charles Patrick Johnson, who served in Desert Storm." Ruth pointed directly across the table.

The Senator skillfully played his next card. "Mr. Charles Johnson, could you stand up so that we all can applaud your service to this great country?"

CP stood, placed his hands at his side, clicked his heels together, and took the stance of attention. The white gloves and thumb were curled inward and placed on the satin stripe of the dress blues pants. The clapping got louder as people stood and cheered. CP reached down and helped Patty up. She threaded her arm through his arm, and the applause got louder—respect and honor can't be faked.

The standing ovation died down, and Lilly needed to make amends. She stood and faced the Senator. "I'm sorry, sir… I meant no disrespect."

"No problem, young lady. I understand your trepidation working in the lumber industry and all."

"Sir, I don't work in the lumber industry. I'm a fishing guide." Lilly replied and sat back down. Ruth reached for Lilly's hand and gave it a squeeze of support.

"There must be some interesting discussions around your family dinner table. A lumberjack versus an outdoor enthusiast." Politicians always need to get in the last word. The crowds let out a little laughter before the Senator got back on track with his speech. Dinner was served, and the ice-breaking period came to an end with all the wine and champagne being consumed.

At a thousand dollars a plate, you would expect the food to be good; it was. Lilly said the lobster tasted like crawfish, and then Ruth wanted to know where crawfish could be caught. Patty and Condi couldn't let work go; their conversation was all about production numbers, employee morale, and the reliability data that they had collected. Kevin and CP were talking about basketball and the new flat screen televisions that were showing up in Sports Bars.

Kevin one-upped CP with, "No matter how big those flat screens become, it's not like watching the Lakers from box seats at the Staples Center."

As dessert was being served, you could hear the band Pearl Jam warming up one floor below. The guitar licks and drum riffs had most of the crowd ready to dance. When Eddie Vedder's raspy voice rang out the lyrics to 'Easy Flow,' a swarm of guests headed for the stairs. The Trask group got herded down the extensive stairs like cattle. From the first landing and out through the glass façade of the Crocker Art Museum, Kevin noticed two men. One with a white turban and the other with a red-and-white checkered headdress. They were talking to someone behind the smoked glass

of a white limousine with diplomatic flags on the front bumper. Kevin tried to work his way closer to the window, but the flow of the crowd was too strong.

The band slowed the music down as the ballroom filled up with guests. CP took Patty by the hand and led her onto the dance floor. The couple looked like something out of a military movie as the spotlight followed them around the dance floor. There were a few more slow songs; Kevin danced with Patty and then with Condi. The second song, CP took his aunt Ruth by the hand and danced with her. Tears flowed onto the Dress Blue Jacket—Ruth so missed her son, Jabbar.

When Pearl Jam let loose with their song 'Black,' the whole ballroom went wild. Patty, Condi, and Lilly had formed a small trio. Patty had taken off her jacket. Her strapless dress put her Chinese dragon tattoo on display. Lilly's long legs and occasional flash of red lace underwear when the dress parted were sensual, not tacky. Condi had smooth moves and natural rhythm.

Someone from behind started pushing Kevin out through the gyrating crowd. When he turned, his nose inhaled a familiar, desirable scent. Tina looked stunning! Her snug white dress barely covered her enhanced breasts. The five-carat diamond necklace was ten times the value of any aristocrat's bling at this event. The opening in her dress let everyone know that her tan was real from head to toe. As like Bathsheba, no king could resist her. Just last week, Kevin had given up the common class for royalty. Tina's features and innate beauty easily made them the king and queen of this event. By the expression on Kevin's face, this night would be beyond dazzling as he desired her.

Kevin yelled out, "You look stunningly beautiful."

Lilly spotted the king and queen of the ball. In that moment, her heart went from bliss to distress. A tall stranger tapped her on the shoulder and asked her to dance. Lilly hoped that Kevin would take note that she was a worthy catch. The tall, debonair gentleman introduced himself, "I'm Tim Baylor. President of Baylor On-site Computer Systems Service."

Patty pulled CP out into the lobby and filled him in. Like a true soldier, CP accepted the mission and took up an observation post. Condi and her mom found Patty in the lobby. They wanted to get on the road for LA. Ruth was still in a fog about why Richard would be attending a Sunday Christian service. After the loss of their son, combined with a pending divorce, Richard's Muslim spirit was weak. The random shooting made it worse. Martyrdom or fighting for a Muslim cause would have softened his hardened heart, but how could attending a Catholic mass help?

Tina's skill at getting even with a boy who said she wore a falsie went all the way back to a middle school dance when she made out

with the eighth grader under the bleachers. She reported him as forcefully feeling her out. The boy was expelled; the false claim was added to his school record. Tina learned the power of bearing false testimony.

Per Hung Meng's instructions, Kevin had to be out of all future land sale meetings—whatever it took. ¬ Tim was good with Tina reliving déjà vu. He had his own plan. Lilly was not a rally or sorority girl quality, but she might be virgin material. If not, her red sexy underwear would look great in his latest video to share with Myung Chan.

This was the night Kevin wouldn't resist Tina! The temptation was as shrewd as when Bathsheba immodestly bathed in front of King David. Tina didn't need to bring down a nation; she only had to help Mr. Hung Meng purchase Trask Inc., which would leave Kevin with a trust of over $50 million.

Deep down in the pit of hard knocks, Lilly was broken. After Tim got her a third glass of champagne, she was okay with him driving her back to the hotel; in the worst-case scenario, she could walk back to the Hampton Inn. The only person who was disgusted with who was pairing up with whom was Patty. She told CP they should go back to the Hampton Inn. CP was happy to hear that suggestion, as he had been logging two weeks without a trip home.

CP dropped Patty off at the lobby's sliding front doors and parked his truck.

"We don't usually give out a guest key to a different room. But since it was your American Express card that was used to book Ms. Saxton's room, I can do that." The night clerk handed Patty a second key card.

Patty grabbed CP's hand and they headed up to the third floor. CP was hanging his dress blues and had just zipped up the garment bag when Patty's dress hit the floor. From behind, she wrapped her arm around CP's waist, and it was evident that he missed her as much as she did him. Wishful, passionate lovemaking turned into a five-minute quickie. "Let's get going," Patty ordered.

With hair spray in hand and the hood of a sweatshirt pulled up and over a ball cap, CP blasted security cameras in the stairwell. In the second-floor hallway, Patty knocked on room 223, listened, and then used the key card to open the door.

CP approached and pointed. "I hair-sprayed that security camera. I didn't see any others on this floor."

"Okay, I'll wait for you up in our room."

Inside CP, unscrewed the light bulb on the nightstand between the beds. Next, he unrolled the rubber bath mat and placed it on the back of the bathtub. With the shower curtain pulled, he sat down. I almost forgot. CP stood, got out of the tub, went over to

the first bed, and yanked off a pillow cover. He barely made it back into the bathtub when he heard the electronic latch in the door.

Tim pushed Lilly face down on the second bed. Back at the door, he hooked up the security chain and then pulled a small video camera from his jacket pocket. Tina was moaning and so drugged up that she couldn't even turn herself over. Tim positioned the camera on the nightstand. The small spy camera didn't have a light source. He tried the nightstand light, but it didn't work. He fully opened the bathroom door, turned on the light, and then turned on the vanity light. He had experience positioning the camera so that his face would not appear on the video.

Mini 8-millimeter video requires a lot of light. The bathroom and vanity lights helped. Tim pulled up Lilly's red dress, then pulled down the red lace panties and waved them in front of the video camera. Another trophy to go along with another notch in his belt. He undid his pants and purposely left them around his ankles. It was a part of his sick, sadistic movie script—violate, sodomize, or do whatever, and then pull up your pants, turn toward the camera, zip up your zipper, and leave. The fringe of Hollywood short films at its best—an award-winning movie that would go viral on the internet dark side.

Lilly was struggling to push herself up and turn over, or do anything, but the Rohypnol was taking effect. When she tried to yell out, Tim pushed her face into a pillow. Now she could feel the large hands around her waist and pulling her up—everything went grey!

CP stepped out of the bathtub, flipped off one of the lights, rushed toward the bed, and delivered a blow to Tim's kidney that doubled him over. Still from behind, CP pulled the pillow slip over Tim's head and then twisted and knotted it. The next blow was delivered to the knockout zone behind the ear. Tim fell backwards onto the first bed. CP hogtied his ankles with his belt and then rolled him off the bed onto the floor. He grabbed two loops of the belt between Tim's ankles and pulled Tim facedown to the door.

The hall was clear. CP dragged Tim face down toward the stairs. For at least a hundred feet, Tim's penis and scrotum were being rubbed against the nylon carpet. CP dropped him under the fire alarm and then pulled it. He ducked into the stairs, and the blasting alarm was echoing off the cinder block walls.

Patty was looking out a peephole at guests milling in the hallway. She pulled open the door the moment she saw CP. He put the room key into her hand. "You were right. That asshole used a date rape drug on Lilly! You need to go help her."

"What about the fire?"

"There's no fire. I pulled the alarm. Stay in the room with Lilly until the fire department leaves. I'll come up when the coast is clear."

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Tina didn't need a date rape drug, but Kevin might. She had him recline the passenger seat of the SL600 while rubbing at the front of his pants. This was not what Kevin envisioned his first sexual experience would be like—in an underground parking garage under mercury vapor lights, breathing in heavy exhaust fumes. "I don't have on any underwear. And you know that I take birth control."

"Yes, I remember. Should I put the top up? The fumes are giving me a headache."

"No," Tina knew that Kevin would be lucky to last two minutes. She lifted her right leg and tried to straddle Kevin when her knee got pinned between the mobile car phone and the seat. "Shit, that hurts!"

Kevin pushed on the bag phone, but it was secured to the dashboard and floorboard. He pulled out the handset, thinking it would free up more space. This time, Tina's knee pushed down on some of the buttons. A dialing sound came from the handset. "BRIDGE BAY MARINA HOURS ARE 9:00 AM TO 9:00 PM. WE ARE CLOSED. PLEASE ALWAYS DRIVE SAFELY ON THE LAKE AND ON THE ROAD."

"Damit, that's worse!" Tina got out of the car. "Like, can't you…"

"Tina, could you shut up for a moment!" Kevin listened to the message a second time, then hit the redial button again and listened for a third time. Benny made that recording. I wonder how his family is doing? Tina worked her dress back down. "That buck-tooth, beanpole with you at the Trask Table. You don't have a room with her, do you?"

"Lilly's not staying in my room!" Kevin refuted the insinuation.

"Like that's good news. I was wondering what you were doing with white trash like her." She plopped into the passenger seat. "Let's go to your room."

The drive over to the Hampton Inn took less than five minutes. All kinds of flashing lights from a fire truck, ambulance, and police car were parked under the hotel awning. The valet waved Kevin to park on the street. What happen? Kevin asked as he got out.

"Looks like some guy got rolled by a pimp. It happens, but never at this hotel."

"What happens?" Kevin asked as Tina got out and headed for the lobby.

"Usually, some great-looking girl advertised as a call girl on Craigslist and tells the John to show up at such and such room. Then the pimp rolls the dude. Of course, the dude doesn't want to fill out a police report for all kinds of reasons."

"Yeah, like a wife or girlfriend," Kevin added his two cents.

"If you put up the top, I'll pull your car off the street after the emergency vehicles leave."

It took a couple of minutes for the rollbar to retract and the top to lock into place. As Kevin entered the lobby, Tina was following the EMT pushing a stretcher. "Tim got mugged!"

Kevin was half shocked but not surprised. Looks like Tim barked up the wrong tree. Payback can be hell.

The EMTs loaded Tim, and when Tina climbed in, Tim yelled, "Where's Mr. Meng's million-dollar diamond necklace?"

Chap 24——————Meatloaf Sandwich

God's voice can touch all kinds, whether through a recorded phone message or an intruding inkling. Kevin was up all night hoping for another sign. Sorting out God's plan is where most people mess up. Yet Kevin had not felt so sure of the direction he needed to go since giving up the Gonzaga basketball scholarship. He was surprised to see Lilly and Patty down in the hotel breakfast lounge so early, but it felt like a part of the spiritual route.

Kevin walked directly to the small square table. "Patty, I need to go up to Shasta Lake and check something out this morning."

"Okay, but what about the basketball game this afternoon in LA?"

"Oh yeah… I forgot about that." Kevin pulled out a chair and sat down. "If we left right now, do you think we could make it up to Shasta Lake and then back to LA by four?" Kevin asked, then noticed CP entering the hotel breakfast lounge.

CP pulled the chair out across from Kevin and began fishing for information. "I wonder what happened last night. The fire department and police were here past midnight."

"A guy got mugged or something. I went directly to my room when I came back from the Crocker Art Museum." Kevin was careful not to mention that he was with Tina.

Patty breathed a sigh of relief. "I didn't hear anything either. I stayed with Lilly last night. I think the lobster or something made her ill."

Kevin looked over at Lilly, "You don't look that good. I feel bad you came all the way down here only to get food poisoning."

Lilly mumbled, "Thanks."

CP and Patty knew that it was not the lobster. It was most likely the Rohypnol wearing off.

Whatever God's plan was, it was eating at Kevin. "CP, can you drive Patty back to LA today? And then take my place in the basketball game at four?"

"Take your place! Hey, bro, you are filling in for me. Not the other way around."

"Patty can get a hold of the Trask private pilot and have him fly you into Portland first thing Monday morning." Kevin was rambling off the top of his head.

CP and Patty glanced at each other. They didn't have any real romantic time last night—quickies don't count.

"What about Lilly?" Patty asked.

"She could ride down and then fly back with CP," Kevin suggested. "Your truck holds three, doesn't it?"

Lilly noticed Patty's expression and knew three would be a crowd. "Don't worry about me, I can take a bus from here, back to Oregon." Lilly offered, while holding her throbbing head.

"No… I could drive Lilly home after I stop at Shasta Lake," Kevin was throwing stuff out to make something work. The spiritual urge to visit Shasta Lake was intensifying by the minute.

"That could work." Patty jumped at Kevin's offer. "We can pick up Gus for the game this afternoon."

"I'll go get my bag and stuff." Lilly was not mentally in a place to put up an argument; she had to steady herself when she stood up.

Kevin waited until Lilly left the breakfast area. "Do you think it was the lobster? Maybe it was too much champagne?"

"Must have been something she ate! We watched over her the entire night," CP replied in Lilly's defense.

Kevin stood up. "Call my mobile phone if there are any questions or problems."

It took Lilly less than five minutes to gather her items and the garment bag. Kevin was anxiously waiting under the hotel awning. He put her pack in the trunk.

The passenger seat was still reclined, and Lilly noticed a bra behind the driver's seat. "Do you want the seat up?" Kevin asked.

"No… but could you hand me the garment bag?" She rolled up the red dress and used it as a makeshift pillow, mindful that she would never need the formal again.

Kevin switched on the passenger's heated seat, and Lilly was out before they pulled onto Interstate 5.

A cool fall fog filled in about fifty miles south of Shasta Lake, and Kevin pulled into a rest stop. Lilly moaned, re-rolled the garment bag, then turned onto her other side. The smell of an abundance of perfume coming off a black brassiere was pungent.

When she pushed it away, she noticed a diamond necklace hooked on the backstrap.

Kevin came back to the passenger side and asked. "Don't you have to use the bathroom?"

"Your girlfriend left this stuff in your car." Lilly held out the bra and diamond necklace. "I'd better go pee."

They arrived at the Bridge Bay Marina just before 11:00 a.m. Kevin headed directly down the ramp onto the dock, only to find the boat rental shack locked up. The mission from above was already off to a bad start. Kevin looked around, then remembered the waitress at the resort restaurant.

The sign on the door of the Big Dipper Grill stated: **Fall Hours: Noon — 5:00**. Kevin jogged across the lot and back to the car. Lilly had returned the passenger seat to the upright position and had been watching Kevin. "Is everything okay?" she asked as Kevin got back into the car.

"Yeah, we're about an hour early before anything opens," Kevin answered. "Do you mind if we take a short drive up to a nearby campground?"

"Sure, no problem." Lilly reclined the seat halfway and closed her eyes. The Rohypnol was not entirely out of her system.

On the drive up to Trinity Loop Campground, Kevin described in detail how the brakes had gone out and how Benny had pulled up on the handbrake. The campground was open, and there were about half a dozen fall hunters filling campsites. When the SL 600 meandered up the backside of Trinity Loop, Lilly got a full view of Mt. Shasta and immediately thought about Billy dying on Mt. Hood. Mt. Shasta was in Northern California, and Mt. Hood was in Northern Oregon. Mt. Shasta was taller than Mt. Hood, but Lilly was sure that more people had died on Mt. Hood. It really didn't matter that Billy had been gone for over three years—mountaineering statistics wouldn't bring her baby brother back.

Kevin drove the loop twice, sensing that a sign from above was unfolding. Everything that had happened back at the beginning of summer seemed like a foggy dream. He pulled back in the parking lot, parked, and jogged down the dock plank. When he pulled open the sliding glass door of the rental shack, a young teenage boy who looked like Benny rose from behind the counter, but slightly older and with shoulder-length hair, asked, "Can I help you?" Kevin took a double-take as a knot formed in his stomach! The voice was similar to the one on the answering machine. "Ah… I'm here because of the message on your answering machine."

"I'm sorry that we haven't changed the message to our off-season hours yet. I hope that you didn't come by earlier?"

"That voice on the answering machine, is that you?"

"No, that was my younger brother, Benny… That's kind of the reason we haven't recorded another message yet."

"I understand," Kevin said. "I was the guy who took your brother for a ride earlier this summer."

"You're Kevin Trask! Benny told me that you let him drive that concept car after a fishtail-sideways slide, then smoke the tires with a handbrake stop at the bottom of the straightaway. I was so jealous."

"I was scared to death." Kevin quipped. "Thank God for Benny! He was the one who pulled the emergency brake. We could have died!" Kevin wished he had chosen his words more carefully.

"We spread some of Benny's ashes over Trinity Loop Road."

Kevin realized that the sign he was expecting was maybe that Benny didn't die on their joyride. To hear that Benny's ashes were up where he had just been thirty minutes ago—perhaps that was the message. "I think about your brother all the time. It's hard to believe that he would take…" Kevin paused.

"FYI, they found different fingerprints on the fiberglass can. Now they don't think Benny was sniffing the fumes. They think…" Conrad stopped. The detectives had told him never to mention to anybody that the medical examiner's report had been changed from suicide to undetermined.

"Are you telling me that Benny wasn't sniffing fiberglass fumes and that they think it was something different?"

"I told you more than I should," Conrad said in a broken voice.

The sliding door opened behind Kevin, and Hank walked into the office with a toolbox in hand. "Conrad, when you get finished with this customer, I need your help in the shop."

"No problem, Dad."

Kevin turned slowly, still digesting Conrad's information.

"Hey, it's you! I've been meaning to send back the balance from the Stargazer railing repair." Hank had a look of getting caught with his hand in the cookie jar.

"What?" Kevin was puzzled.

"You know? Trask Inc. sent a check for $5,000. The repair was only around two thousand at the most." Hank moved behind the counter. He pulled out an invoice with a brown money envelope stapled to it. "Here's about half of the balance. I still owe you about fifteen hundred dollars."

Kevin took the envelope from Hank and slurred the words, "Okay, thanks…" He left the rental shack dazed. It felt as though he was being pushed up the dock ramp by Benny. That Benny had found infinite peace.

"Is everything okay?" Lilly asked out the passenger window as Kevin approached.

"Yeah, just reflecting on something." Kevin looked at Mt. Shasta and then made the sign of the cross over his chest, something his grandfather did every morning before unlocking the doors at Trask Inc., when it was just a small welding shop. "Do you want to get lunch? They got pretty good food in the restaurant over there. It should be open by now."

"Sure," Lilly braced herself and stepped out of the car; her knees were still wobbly.

Edna motioned Kevin and Lilly to take a booth and followed them with a pot of coffee. She had recognized the SL600 out in the parking lot. "Hey, college boy, are you back to finally give me that ride in that fancy Mercedes?"

Kevin tossed the invoice and cash envelope onto the table and slid across the bench seat. "I forgot I did promise you a ride."

Lilly slid in across from Kevin and turned a coffee cup over. "Is that decaf?"

"No, it's the real stuff," Edna answered and winked.

"Good," Lilly replied.

"I'll have fresh-squeezed orange juice," Kevin said as he picked up the menu.

"Fresh squeezed from a can," Edna said and walked back toward the counter.

"They've got a good BLT here," Kevin said, glancing down through the menu.

"I'm hungrier than that," Lilly replied as she started looking over the menu. "If they have lobster, I'm definitely not having that."

Kevin put down the menu and picked up the repair invoice. Five thousand dollars was the first line item; the railing repair had come to less than two thousand dollars. Inside the cash envelope was over $1,300.

Edna returned with a pitcher of water and filled Kevin's glass. "I watched you go down to the boathouse. Did you meet Conrad?"

"Yeah, he looks and sounds a lot like Benny."

"Yep! He's a good kid. He has really stepped up since Benny…" Edna couldn't finish her sentence.

"I heard they found fingerprints on a can of fiberglass or something?" Kevin was hinting at information that was more substantial than what Conrad had provided.

"I don't know. But that Deputy Ty Prickhead asked if Benny was a glue sniffer. He was implying a family of druggie's…" Edna stopped mid-sentence.

"When was the last time the deputy was here?" Kevin asked.

"It's been at least a month," Edna answered, then looked at Lilly. "Do you know what you would like, young lady?"

"Can I still order breakfast?" Lilly asked.

"Not a problem," Edna replied and put her pencil to the order tablet.

"I would like the ham and cheese omelet with hash browns, and could I have pancakes instead of toast?"

Edna looked at Kevin. "And for you, college boy?"

"I'll have a BLT," Kevin replied, looking back over the repair invoice.

"Okay." Edna headed toward the order-up window, snapped the order onto the chrome hanging carousel, and twisted it one-eighty so the cook could read the order.

"Is that all you're having, a BLT?" Lilly asked.

"Yeah, there's a place up in Myrtle Creek, Oregon, that serves the best meatloaf. If I get hungry again, maybe we can stop there." Kevin folded up the invoice and slipped it next to the cash in the brown envelope.

Edna came back with orange juice and refilled Lilly's coffee. She shared that Conrad was now attending community college and was hoping to get into an apprenticeship program. Kevin asked again for the name of the deputy who had been snooping around and asking about Benny and glue sniffing.

When Edna brought their food, she mentioned how Hank still had Benny's message on the boat rental phone line and that she would call that number during off-hours to hear Benny's voice. Kevin asked for a pencil and a piece of paper and wrote down the name **Ty Prichard.** He then took the brown envelope and wrote **Paid in Full** on the outside. He waited for Lilly to finish her pancakes and then pulled two twenties from his pocket and placed them on the table. Kevin caught Edna between customers and forced the brown envelope into her hand. "Would you make sure Conrad gets this?"

"Sure thing, college-boy!" Edna slipped the money envelope into her apron pocket. "Godspeed on your mission."

They just made it down the stairs when Lilly reached over for Kevin's hand. "That was a nice thing to do."

Kevin squeezed Lilly's hand. "Do you mind if we stop at the sheriff's office in Redding?"

"You're the driver, college-boy." Lilly pulled Kevin to a stop and gave him a quick peck on the cheek.

"I'm not in college any longer," Kevin replied and then started pulling Lilly at a fast pace toward the SL600.

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When they pulled in front of the Redding Sheriff's Office, Lilly asked, "Is it okay to use your car phone and let my mom know what's going on?"

"You can try to call, but when I was here this summer, I couldn't get a signal." Kevin hurried into the building.

Lilly reached Mary with no problem. She let her mom know she was getting a ride home with Kevin Trask. Mary was eager to hear about the dance, but Lilly cut the call short. After about thirty minutes, she went into the building. Kevin was being fingerprinted!

She stayed her distance and watched Kevin use hand wipes to clean the ink off his fingers and palm. Kevin came over. "They want to compare my prints to the ones they pulled off a can of fiberglass resin." Kevin offered quietly.

Lilly whispered to Kevin. "Shouldn't you have a lawyer present before you volunteer fingerprints? That deputy over there could swap your fingerprints with the ones they have."

Kevin walked back to the counter. "On second thought, I don't want you to have my hand and fingerprints."

"Too late, I have already scanned them into the computer database." Deputy Ty Prichard spoke, flashing a sinister smile. Kevin remembered dealing with him and Sheriff Matt Wilson the day that he and Patty got hauled off the houseboat and Patty ended up behind bars in just her bikini.

Lilly casually pulled Kevin out of the station. Her intuition was in high gear. "Can I use the phone again?"

"Sure…" Kevin plopped down behind the steering wheel, dumbfounded about what he had just done without a lawyer present.

"Hey, Bull, could you do me a favor?" Lilly spoke into the handset.

"Whatever you need, Little Lilly," Bull answered.

"Could you check the Redding Police Department's records to see if they scanned anything into an evidence database?"

"Sure, when did they do that?"

"About fifteen minutes ago."

"Do you have an address, phone number, or the evidence file number? Something that can get me pointed in the right direction." Bull asked.

Lilly looked through the windshield and read the address off the Redding Police dept building. Bull said that he would look into it. Kevin stayed mum.

They were almost to the Oregon border when the mobile phone rang. Lilly took the handset from the black canvas bag. Bull informed her that there had been images scanned into Benny Erickson's evidence file at 2:52 pm that day. Bull said any additional investigation would require a search warrant.

Finally, Kevin opened up to Lilly about the houseboat party, including how Tim had made a move on Tina and how hurt he was by it. He shared that Patty was the only one who had his back and

that they had prayed for Benny before they innocently slept on the top deck of the Stargazer. He also shared the Trask Inc. buyout and the pending lawsuit against Trask Insurance with Ann Marie's family. Kevin even backtracked to when Grandpa Trask made him cut the lawn at a home for unwed mothers, ten years earlier. He didn't detail the skinny-dipping part, but did say how everyone made fun of him about that infamous day in the pool.

After more than an hour, Lilly wanted to yell at the top of her lungs to bear the cross, to buck up, and deal with life. Wisely, she kept her thoughts to herself. *How can some rich college guy who has everything be whining to me? My dad has been out of work for over a year. My mom has been cutting down on her medication. My living with crooked teeth is what poor people do. Kevin probably had braces in middle school because all the other rich kids had them, just for status. The Saxtons and the Johnsons are working stiffs—living one paycheck to the next if we're that blessed.* No matter how hard Lilly tried to resent the Trask elite status, it wasn't easy.

A road sign ahead wasn't a sign from God, but it could be a reprieve for Lilly. "Isn't Myrtle Creek the place you wanted to get a meatloaf sandwich?"

"Yes, it is," Kevin replied, and merged into the right lane.

"I should give my mom a call and let her know that it will be dark before we make it back to Zigzag."

"You can try that mobile phone. It is hit and miss outside of big cities."

Lilly opened the top of the bag phone. "Should I put my number into the favorite call redial log?" Lilly chided.

"Sure, I'm still planning on that fishing trip you promised."

Kevin no sooner got his words out when a tingle shot up his spine. *The Bridge Bay Boat Rental number couldn't have been in the Caller ID log. I never called Bridge Bay Resort from the bag phone. How could Tina's knee hit that small dial button when we were in the parking garage? How'd I get a signal underground? I bet Benny's message was a call from above…*

Lilly invaded Kevin's thoughts again. "There's no dial tone."

"I'll look for a payphone," Kevin responded and then dove back into his brain quest. *My phone didn't work in the parking lot of the Bridge Bay Resort. No way it would have worked way up by the Trinity Loop campgrounds.*

Tina broke into Kevin's brain quest for a third time. "I'll call my mom from that place with the famous meatloaf."

"Yeah, okay." Kevin casually replied and went back to thinking. *I wonder if the mobile phone company has a record of my phone calls? I know that it was more than an accident when Tina's knee jammed down on the keypad and dialed Benny…*

"The place looks closed," Lilly said when they pulled into the parking lot.

"The bar in the back should be open," Kevin replied. "I'll be right in. I want to go check on something."

"I'll see if they have a payphone to call my mom." Lilly got out of the car, went into the dark restaurant, and spotted the hall to the bar. There was a payphone in the connecting hallway, along with a foul smell reeking from a room that had **Buck's** on the door. The door directly across the hall had a sign that read **Doe's**. The long-distance phone call was brief and to the point. Mary sought details about the formal dinner and dance, but her mother's intuition told her it hadn't been the Cinderella story she'd hoped for.

By the time Kevin came through the hallway, Lilly had already struck up a conversation with another logging peer.

"You didn't tell me that your rich college friend and driver was Mr. Cute boy from the Trask family." Linda immediately came out from behind the bar and went over to Kevin. She hugged him for the longest time and then pulled his head down while rising on her toes to kiss him.

The unexpected greeting pulled Kevin back to reality. "Is it just you and your dad? Is it too late to get a meatloaf sandwich?"

"Hell no, it's not too late!" Yelled Big Ed as he busted through the swinging doors between the kitchen and bar. Big Ed gave Kevin a bear hug that could pop ribs. "Hey, what you did for Nick Icorn, fixing up his old motorhome and sending the comic books to the Philippines, and all, had a significant impact on so many people."

"Yeah, my personal assistant told me the superhero books made it all the way to the Philippines. I'm glad that they're back in those families' hands."

"Nick told us about Gus, your engineer. The World War II footlocker and how they finalized specifications in Gus's red engineering book."

Kevin thought about how often he didn't have time for Gus or ignored him. *I forgot about the red engineering book that Gus gave me.*

"Nick and Gus hit it off pretty well," Big Ed said while wiping his hands on the grease-stained apron.

"Yes, they did." Kevin quipped.

"Did you know Nick signed his motel over to the two dick-heads?"

"No, I didn't know that." Kevin was trying to recall the location of the red binder.

"Yeah, Randy and Joe have been fixing the place up." Big Ed replied. "Son, come on into the kitchen, and I'll fill you in."

Kevin followed Big Ed into the kitchen, and they did some hard shots, toasting Nick, Randy, and Joe with their future endeavors. Lilly got filled in about Kevin wandering into the bar at the beginning of summer and found out the prayer that she wrote for Kevin was on the back of Lilly's fishing guide service brochure. Kevin and Big Ed kept drinking. Lilly drank coffee; she swore off alcohol after the senator's fundraiser.

Two hours later, after enjoying a meatloaf sandwich and bribing Big Ed for the recipe, Lilly made a second call from the hallway payphone. Kenneth wasn't worried; she was always the responsible one. Additionally, the log truck broke a hydraulic hose, so the plan to start Richard Johnson falling and loading trees was pushed back a couple of days.

Kevin staggered into the hallway. "Everything okay, Miss or Ms. Mistic Lilly?"

"Dad, I've got to go. I'll see you and Mom tomorrow."

"Sounds good, Love you." Ken hung up.

Lilly pushed Kevin against the wall, dug her hand into his pocket, and started feeling around. She shoved her hand into Kevin's other pocket and was surprised that Kevin was getting aroused.

"Looking for these?" Linda asked from the end of the hallway while holding up a set of car keys. Then she gave Lilly directions to the no-tell motel.

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Randy came out of the back room using his cane; he was stunned to see Kevin steadying himself at the motel check-in counter. "It's good to see you again, Mr. Trask."

"It's good to see you again, also. We just had meatloaf." Kevin burped. "With big Ed and Linda." Kevin burped again; this time, he half-covered his mouth.

"You're not going to get sick, are you?" Randy stepped back from the counter. "Meatloaf the second time around doesn't smell that good."

Lilly added, "Remember, don't fart out loud."

Randy laughed and added. "Better not shart yourself."

Kevin was too wasted to be embarrassed and pulled out a money clip. "Ed showed me where he keeps his Kentucky whiskey in the kitchen."

"I bet he did, Randy," said, and pulled a fifty from the money clip.

"The big guy filled me in on the one-dollar motel deal with the scuba guy." Kevin missed his pocket, and the money clip hit the

ground. "We toasted you and Joe now being motel owners." Kevin hiccupped.

Lilly picked up the money and worked it into Kevin's pocket.

"Ah… I like it when you keep feeling around in my pockets."

Lilly blushed and then thought. *Typical. Drunk guys always think with their dicks.*

"Looks like you're lucky to have had a designated driver," Randy offered, wanting to play down Lilly's embarrassment.

Kevin held onto the counter. "Yes, sir, Randy. I'm lucky to have Lilly as my designated driver, my backup dinner date, and friend. She's like the best big sister a guy could ask for." Kevin steadied himself and then turned around.

Lilly's embarrassment turned to hurt. She was Billy's big sister. She knew Kevin was drunk and didn't mean it like that. She was always considered a friend or the 'big sister'. Maybe it was because she was taller than most boys.

Kevin slept like a rock. The 8:00 am wakeup call mixed with the sound of running water. He rolled over and eyed his clothes neatly folded on and over the back of a chair. The sound of the shower stopped; he massaged his pounding head and rubbed his tongue around his grimy mouth. He tried to focus on what had happened the night before. All he could remember was Lily's hand doing something in or with his pants. The running water stopped. Kevin slowly rolled out of bed, worked himself to the sink, and used his finger for a makeshift toothbrush.

In the mirror, the bathroom door opened. Lilly was behind him in a red bra and panties, barefoot, with a towel wrapped around her wet hair. "Kevin, I need to tell you something." As Kevin turned, Lilly noticed the semi-erection.

"Ah… Okay," Kevin stuttered while getting a whiff of lavender shampoo.

"It can wait until we're on the road." Lilly brushed close to Kevin and went to a chair, and with her back turned, slowly worked her jeans up her long legs and over her firm butt. She could feel Kevin's stare—it felt empowering.

Two hours later, of mostly silence, the hangover was easing when Kevin asked, "You want coffee or a muffin or anything?"

"Maybe, but I got to pee first." Kevin parked at the gas pump, and Lilly jumped out and rushed into the deli store.

While Kevin was at the beverage counter, Lilly got behind him and pushed her knees into the back of his knees. Kevin almost tumbled backward and warned. "You almost got a chest full of hot coffee!"

"I'd rather have a full chest than a coffee chest," Lilly blurted out words that didn't make any sense.

"Okay?" Kevin replied, confused. "Hey, grab a box of those mini-donuts over there." Kevin motioned with his head.

"How about one of these big blueberry muffins, too?" Lilly asked.

They no sooner got back onto the interstate when Kevin asked. "What is the difference between a full chest and a coffee chest? I don't get it."

Lilly took a long sip of hot coffee. "Okay, but first, tell me why last night you told me that you knew that I took birth control."

"I said that?" Kevin questioned himself. "I'm sorry, it was a crude thing to say."

"No big deal." Lilly took a bite of the muffin. "Were you asking if I took birth control?"

"I don't think so? Last night I took too many straight shots with Big Ed. The whiskey made me act stupid."

"Okay, you're forgiven. We'll blame it on the whiskey," Lilly said, and then broke the muffin in half. "Try a bite of this." She fed Kevin part of her muffin.

"Maybe I was thinking of Tina. She always tells me that she takes the pill when we are about to…" Kevin halted; he didn't need to share personal stuff.

"Why would she tell you about the pill? You've been a couple for a long time, haven't you?"

"Yeah, all through college," Kevin took a drink of coffee. "But she was at Pepperdine, and I was at Duke; we were thousands of miles apart."

"But you two still got together for your basketball games and breaks and stuff."

"Yeah, we saw each other quite a lot… But we just never got totally together."

"What?" Lilly was trying to get her head straight. "Are you saying that you and Tina have never gone all the way?"

"Yes! It's not that I don't want to… It's kind of a hang-up that my Granddad put me on when I was fourteen. After he caught me skinny dipping and…" Kevin went on to explain the whole cutting lawns at a home for unwed mothers while holding on to the old-fashioned chaste virtue his granddad instilled.

Lilly kept sharing Kevin pieces of the blueberry muffin as she listened to his childhood-through-college saga of being known as a goody-two-shoes.

The GPS beeped, and Lilly looked at the display. "This fancy phone says we'll be in Zigzag in an hour and 40 minutes."

"It's your turn now," Kevin said. "I want to hear all about the chest full versus coffee full statement."

"You have noticed that I don't have big boobs, haven't you?"

"Ah… yeah, I guess." Kevin was somewhat taken aback; he liked how openly Lilly talked. "If that bothers you, why not get implants. That is what Tina got for graduation."

"How flat was Tina?" Lilly asked.

"I don't know. I never knew her then."

"Didn't she just graduate from Pepperdine?"

"Yeah, but she got her breast implants when she graduated from high school. They were a graduation gift from her stepfather."

"That is weird," Lilly said quietly, then asked. "Her stepfather?"

"Yeah, I know. Her stepdad is always talking about them."

"Are you referring to them as Tina's boobs?"

"Yes," Kevin answered.

"That's creepy," Lilly stated. "I would never trust her stepfather around my daughter."

"Do you have a daughter?" Kevin asked.

"No," Lilly answered immediately. "If I had a daughter, I wouldn't trust her within a hundred yards of an old guy focused on a high school girl's cup size."

"Cup size?"

"That's how they measure breasts."

"I get it. So, you are a one cup size, and Tina is like two cups of flesh size, per side."

"Yeah, sort of." Lilly wanted to know more, not explain bra sizes. "What's her mom think? It all sounds creepy to me."

"Her mom, Nancy, is the same way. That entire family worries way too much about that kind of stuff. Tina is beautiful without all the fake fingernails, tanning, and spa appointments that they do for her."

"No kidding!" Lilly replied and then spoke softly. "I would have been happy with getting braces for my high school graduation."

"Why didn't you get them?"

"They cost a lot of money." Lilly quipped. "Probably as much as breast implants."

"Doesn't your dental insurance cover braces?"

"We've never had dental insurance," Lilly said while feeding Kevin another piece of muffin. "Braces would be considered a cosmetic procedure, the same as implants."

"Oh…" Kevin chewed and swallowed the piece of muffin. Lilly was easy to talk with. He took a drink of coffee. "Do you think insurance companies try to screw over people?"

"Hell yes," replied Lilly. "That's like asking if rich people are concerned about poor people."

"That's not fair," Kevin firmly replied. "My parents are rich, and they do a lot for the community."

"That's great! I'm generalizing."

"My mom just started a tennis scholarship at the club for some families that are struggling with college tuition."

"Kevin, those parents could relinquish their club membership and send their spoiled brats to community college." Lilly sarcastically replied.

The next hour turned into a heated discussion about class warfare. Lilly began to realize that Kevin didn't get it. The working class struggles just to put food on the table and keep a roof over their heads. Kevin's family and club members were different; they had their tables of plenty inside gated communities.

Kevin pulled into the gravel-and-potholed parking lot. He continued to try to sway Lilly that not all wealthy people are self-centered a-holes.

"I need to go into the shop. My Mom just looked out the door window for the third time."

"Okay, but I'm right about the social impact of different classes and cultures around the world. Humanities was my major at Duke." Kevin boasted.

"I thought it was basketball." Lilly reached for the door handle.

"That's not fair," Kevin replied.

Lilly let go of the door handle and looked directly at Kevin. "Okay, Mr. College humanities expert, that just went on all about himself, his rich friends, and his beautiful girlfriend for the last two hours. What was the one thing that I told you last night when I put your drunk ass in bed?"

"Ah… You told me… You told me…" Kevin rubbed at his forehead for at least thirty seconds. "I don't remember."

"Exactly! I told you I don't like being called the big sister all the time. I've had a whole life of being the responsible one. The big sister is always expected to get everyone home on time, always making sure to…"

Kevin didn't let Lilly finish. "Well, it bothers me when people keep calling me the rich college kid!"

Frustrated, she got out and trudged up the stairs into the fishing guide shop. Mary sensed that the trip or dance had not gone as planned. "Are you okay?"

The doorknob bells rang out again. Mary looked over and said, "Office Bull Elk has called three times looking for you, Mr. Trask."

"Thanks, Mrs. Saxton," Kevin replied.

"Please call me Mary or Peg. You can use the phone in the kitchen." Mary motioned toward the short hallway behind the trophy case.

"Thanks, please call me Kevin," he said as he squeezed past the women.

"Mom, make sure never to call him the rich college boy." Lilly went out the door to get her luggage.

Kevin was talking on the yellow wall phone, rubbing Tucker's head, when Mary came into the small room and overheard… "Sounds good, I'll meet you in the Timberline Lodge parking lot."

"I have leftover ham from Sunday dinner. Would you like a sandwich?" Mary asked.

"That sounds good," Kevin said, now rubbing and petting Tucker with both hands.

Lilly came into the kitchen, tossed her stuff in the corner, poured a cup of coffee, and then sat at the table. "Tucker, come see me."

"Lilly, a secretary from Byron Shepard's office, called. They would like you to testify at a subcommittee about the spotted owl. She said your logging and fishing guide background would be a great testimony."

"Oh?" Lilly was surprised by the call after her outburst during the Senator's speech.

"Senator Sherpard probably wants you to fly back to Washington, DC, to testify. He told me that they would be back in session next week." Kevin added to the conversation.

"I wonder how much airfare to the East Coast is these days?" Mary said as she used a cane to walk to the refrigerator.

"If you go back to testify before a Senate committee, I'm sure they pay the airfare, put you up in a nice hotel," Kevin said. "Lilly, you should call his secretary and find out."

"I wouldn't even know how to get around in a big city," Lilly said in a monotone voice.

"Getting around DC is no big deal. Just stay on Constitution Avenue. The trees in Memorial Park are breathtaking in the fall. Most of the museums you can walk to or take a cab." Kevin was now down on one knee, petting Tucker.

"Do you like mustard and mayonnaise?" Mary asked.

"Both will be fine," Kevin answered.

"Hold on, you two! If that senator wants me to fly all the way back to the East Coast, I'm going to decline."

"Don't say that, honey! You need to take this opportunity and see something other than Zigzag, Oregon."

"You should go. You'd be testifying for the working class," Kevin coyly said.

In a show of defiance, Lilly crossed her arms across her chest. "And what would I wear? All I own is jeans and outdoor gear."

"What about that red dress?" Kevin perked up. "You looked smoking hot and were turning heads at the fundraiser."

Lilly's folded arms went limp. "I don't think that is what someone would wear into a congressional meeting room," Lilly rebutted.

"We could go shopping and get you some proper attire," Mary sent a smile of encouragement to Lilly.

"Yeah, that red dress and that matching red sexy underwear would overheat some of those dinosaurs in Congress. Probably best you go shopping. I'll call Patty and have her get you an outfit for coming down and being my date. I owe you for that."

"Patty doesn't have to do that for me."

"She's all about the business, look at work and leisure outfits when we were at Lake Shasta. She's also great at picking out three wheelers."

Mary looked directly at Kevin with a blank expression. *How does he know about the red matching under garments? What the heck is a three-wheeler? I hope it isn't some weird party thing?*

Lilly could only hold her frown and scrunched eyebrows for a few seconds. *I so disdain the rich college boy types. I've always wanted to travel outside of Oregon. Last week, California. Now, God willing, Washington, DC — The Smithsonian, Arlington, The National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception…*

Chap 25——————Cremation-of-Care

Officer Bull Elk flashed the blue patrol car lights when Kevin drove into the Timberline lodge parking lot. There were no more than twenty cars in the five-acre lot; it was past summer and before ski season. Snow could start falling any day, but the ski lifts officially open on Thanksgiving break. Looking at Mount Hood behind the lodge made one more thing appear on Kevin's to-do list. *I'm going to summit this mountain—next time I'll be better prepared and won't use boots that aren't broken in.*

They met between the two cars. "Hey Kevin, thanks for meeting me up here." Bull shook Kevin's hand.

"No problem, Officer Bull," Kevin replied.

"Lilly had asked me to check into the evidence file at the Redding Police Department for a Benny Erickson."

"Yeah, she called you from the phone in my car," Kevin replied.

"Well, I did some checking, and something's not right. First thing this morning, I called from the Warm Springs Police Department office and requested that the fingerprints be faxed." Bull went back to his patrol car and retrieved the fax. "This hand and partial fingerprints have the same unique marking across the palm as the one you showed me last time. Remember when we were in this parking lot? It was the day after you got the blisters from the new climbing boots."

Kevin instantly took the fax and focused on the palm print. "This is the same scar across the palm as the one that was left on my windshield."

"I remembered how you asked me about the print that you had taped on the back of the fishing brochure," Bull said, and then asked. "Did you keep the brochure?"

"Yeah. It's in my office somewhere."

"Well, you should give that evidence to the Redding Police Department. It could be helpful."

"I don't know?" Kevin kept staring at the palm print on the fax. "That Sheriff Wilson and his deputy down there in Redding have it in for me. I don't trust them!"

"What are their names?" Bull Elk asked as he pulled a notepad from his pocket.

"The Sheriff is Matt Wilson and the deputy is Ty Prichard," Kevin answered.

Officer Bull wrote down the information. "I'll check them out and get back to you."

"Thanks." Kevin handed back the fax. "Now what is this about some insurance for helicopter logging?" Kevin asked.

"I was helping CP get a commercial driver's license when we started talking about Desert Storm. CP knows a helicopter pilot from the war who has a small start-up helicopter operation. The Rez needs some beetle-infested trees removed from a slot canyon on the east slope of Mt. Jefferson."

"Is that Mount Jefferson over there?" Kevin interrupted Bull and pointed due south.

"Yes, it's located on the southwest corner of the Warm Springs Reservation, and there is limited road access into the area," Bull answered, then explained that only a helicopter could remove the infested trees from the narrow canyon.

Kevin listened but kept looking down the Cascade Mountain Range. About fifty miles south, Mount Jefferson was luring Kevin. Maybe this would be the next mountain to satisfy the do-or-die mantra that addicted thrill seekers often succumb to.

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Kevin decided to take a different route home. For the first forty-plus miles on Highway 97, Mt Jefferson was showing off its splendor out the passenger side of the SL600. The Three Sisters were the next mountains to come into sight. Kevin had hiked up the South Sisters Mountain one spring break when his family had vacationed at the Sunriver resort south of Bend, Oregon. After crossing into California, Mt. Shasta came into Kevin's sights. The God-speak mission was still calling. *Maybe mountain climbing is my answer for getting closer to God. Mt. Jefferson, Mt. Shasta, Mt. Hood, and others can be my mission. Maybe start a 501 (c), better yet, an NGO. I'll call it 'Climbing mountains for the poor'. Or…*

With two hundred plus bodies still frozen on the infamous mountain of Do or Die. The unanswered question is whether these surrendered spirits can ever rest on Everest. Kevin was a good specimen for a pride-filled do-gooder, going wrong.

The drive from the Timberline Lodge parking lot to the Trask trailer parking lot took less than twenty hours. Kevin was physically exhausted but mentally pumped to climb mountains. Patty wasn't at her desk. He quickly searched through the papers on his desk and took a deep breath when he found the fishing brochure. He folded his hands on top of all the papers and put his head on his hands for a short nap.

Ten minutes past five, Patty was pulling on a jacket and standing in the doorway. Her thoughts jumped back and forth between whether to wake Kevin and whether not to. She lightly knocked on the door.

Kevin raised his head; he wiped a string of drool off his mouth. "Patty, is it quitting time already?"

"Yes," Patty answered and walked into the office. She handed her yellow notepad over the desk. "Here is a list that we can go over now or first thing in the morning."

Kevin looked down at the first page and flipped to the second page. "Nothing on here looks as though it can't wait until morning."

"Okay, then I'll see you first thing in the morning," Patty replied, noticing Kevin adding something to the bottom of the list. "What are you writing down? Do you need me to get on something tonight before I go home?"

"No, it can wait." Kevin handed the notepad back to Patty.

She looked at the last items Kevin wrote on her notepad

1. **Call Lilly to help her with clothes.**
2. **Get two tickets for Hawaii after the Shultz insurance meeting recap.**

"What kind of clothes for Lilly? Who are the tickets to Hawaii for?"

"It took me over an hour on the drive down from Oregon with Lilly on speaker phone before she finally gave in to fly back to Washington, D.C. and testify."

"That's why you want me to help with her wardrobe selection."

"Yeah, something to wear when she testifies before Congress and something casual for sightseeing. Don't let her play the poor me card. Get her some sharp attire like how you dress at work."

"I can do that." Patty liked that Kevin noticed her professional attire,

"Whatever, make arrangements with the Trask pilot to fly into Portland for a shopping spree. Stay overnight, that way, you can have some alone time with CP."

"Okay, and then after that, get tickets for you and her to Hawaii?"

"No, why would you think that?"

"Then you want me to get tickets for Tina and you?" Patty asked, dreading the answer.

"No!" Kevin snapped his reply. "Lilly told me how you and CP privately got married. Something about your grandmother's culture and shacking up." Kevin paused. "Those were Lilly's words, not mine."

"Granny's words were not that nice. But she loves me. Now she adores CP."

"I get it. My grandad had the same feelings, but used the words 'knocked up'."

"Kevin, I know it's not cool to respect our elders these days, but I really respect my grandma. She has always been there for me."

"I hear you. My grandpa didn't say much, but what he did was from words carved into stone." Kevin wiped at a tear. "Get first-class tickets for you and CP. It's my wedding gift. You can stay at the Trask condominium."

"Ah… That was supposed to be our secret."

"No problem." Kevin stood and held his arms open. "Congratulations, the two of you make an attractive couple."

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Mr. Hung Meng had the hour-long recording of Kevin and Lilly's lengthy phone conversation and drudged through it. The five-minute recording of Officer Bull and Kevin talking was what he listened to over and over. Bull Elk said that he now requested the entire evidence file on Benny Erickson. He also stated that he ran the license plate on Kevin's car. The car was registered to Hung Meng Imports, and additional information would be forthcoming. The Warm Springs Indian Reservation is a sovereign nation within the United States, so forms had to be completed and signed off by a federal judge.

Myung Chan was in Thailand, a Tier-Two sex trafficking country. All the child porn that Tim Baylor had shown him in the back room of Baylor's on-site computer systems wasn't enough. He had to have a six-year-old virgin! In Thailand, for as little as five hundred dollars, his evil sickness could be satisfied. The ultimate would be a beauty pageant winner who looked like Jon Benét Ramsey. The news media continually flashed pictures of this

six-year-old child, dressed to look like a runway model. The combination of child porn, Jon Benet's sexual assault, and all the experts on television showing how to use a garrote had Myung Chan at the tipping point. The metal garrote that he used in the political prisons in North Korea left a scar on his hand—something as simple as a wooden handle could have prevented his hand from being cut. Myung had already been careless twice; once with his prints on the windshield and again on the can of fiberglass resin. Now, they were on the handles of a garrote left around the neck of a sex worker eighty-three thousand miles from LAX.

Often, partners in crime turn on each other. Mr. Meng was already grooming his next recruit. Tim Baylor's pride would take more time to get under Meng's control than Myung's sick lust for children. Tim was also a sexual predator. For him, it was filling out a scorecard of models. Like winning a basketball championship—it was about dominance, cheating, and doing whatever. Tina had been marked off his scorecard after the Shasta Lake college party. At least she still had trading value.

Hung Meng gave Tim an ultimatum. Use her for the Cremation-of-Care ritual at the base of a 40-foot-tall owl statue in a private old-growth Redwood grove in Northern California. Or make an 8mm video of Tina being choked out using a fake diamond necklace like the one she lost after the Governor's party.

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Patty heard Kevin taking the stairs two at a time. She waited five minutes before she entered the crow's nest with a fresh cup of coffee and a plate. "I'm so excited, I was up all night. I baked cookies at two in the morning. Would you like some?"

"That sounds great," Kevin replied while looking over the top of the tri-fold fishing brochure.

"I called CP the moment I got home yesterday." Patty handed Kevin his coffee and set the small plate of cookies on the corner of his desk. "He thinks your honeymoon present to Hawaii is too much."

"Oh, bullshit." Kevin took a sip of coffee. "I owe both of you more than a trip to Hawaii for everything you two have done at Trask Inc."

"Neither of us has been to Hawaii," Patty replied with excitement.

"You'll like it... The Trask condo is right on the beach." Kevin folded the fishing brochure and handed it to Patty. "I need this mailed to the Warm Springs Police Department; attention Officer Bull Elk Whitefoot."

"I didn't know Mr. Bull Elk was a Police officer? I thought he was a logger?" Patty said and then took the brochure from Kevin.

"Bull does a little of everything on the Reservation up there in Central Oregon." Kevin reached for a cookie. "Bull even coaches a soccer team on the Rez."

"He sounds like a good person," Patty replied.

"These cookies are delicious," Kevin said, drank some coffee, and then stood. "I need to go down and talk to Condi about our next insurance meeting."

"I'll get this brochure in the mail right away." Patty followed Kevin out the door.

Down one floor, Condi glanced up from an amber computer screen. "Yes, Kevin."

"Condi, let's go talk in the conference room where my dad can't overhear."

"Your dad is playing golf this morning with Mr. Hung Meng," Condi replied.

"Oh… We need to strategize for our next insurance meeting." Kevin said, taking a bite of the fresh cookie.

"I'll be right in," Condi replied. "I just need to send off papers to the workers' comp department. We have another employee faking a back injury."

While Kevin waited, he laid out the photographs the insurance company's private eye had compiled of Ann Marie and the Schultz family in Michigan doing everyday stuff. Condi was a good choice for the Friday meeting with the insurance adjustor, especially since it didn't even bother her to be involved. When her father was fired from Trask Inc., Condi was all business and didn't take it personally.

Condi and Kevin spent all morning going over a plan. Finally, Kevin stood. "I'm going to lunch. Let's get together again after you talk with the Insurance Commissioner."

"Sounds good. It will take me at least a week to get a meeting of this importance in order," Condi replied as she gathered up all the documents.

Sunday was Kevin's turn to fill in for CP on the Sparks city league basketball team. It was a needed diversion. Kevin played the entire game while Gus charted the statistics. Kevin and Gus were now welcomed at the Poinsette Rec Center, and each week they earned more respect. After the win, Gus shared the player efficiency report with the team, and they stopped for dinner. Gus was still adamant about not moving off-site and shifted their conversation to superheroes. When Kevin dropped Gus off Sunday evening, Gus hurried inside the small apartment and returned with a stack of Robin Hood magazines for Kevin to read.

After Kevin got home and up to his room, above the six-car garage, he put the stack of plastic-jacketed magazines in a drawer in the nightstand. The Robin Hood tales were now on top of the red binder that Gus had asked Kevin to look over. Kevin sprawled out on the bed and called Tina from the phone on the nightstand. This landline wasn't tapped, but on the other end, Tim Baylor listened in, ear to ear, with Tina.

Monday morning, Patty and Condi were the first to pull up to the security gate. Condi had picked up Patty, and they were talking Trask Inc. business. In Gus's mind, not being addressed by your birth name was insulting, such as being called a retard or a stupid misfit. Kevin had explained over dinner how some name-calling could also be a compliment, like when a black man calls a white man 'Bro'. Gus lifted the gate and, as they drove through, said, "Good morning, you two Mother-hens."

Condi and Patty giggled, then went back to work talk. Their conversation carried into the conference room. Condi was excited; she would finally speak her peace. The insurance meeting that Kevin asked her to conduct would also be her two-week exit announcement.

Patty had mixed feelings about keeping Condi's departure quiet. Maybe she'd be offered a permanent position at Trask Inc. Condi had just been the maid of honor at her small impromptu wedding; she felt more like a sister than a friend. Whatever the way things were to unfold, both women had one thing in common: their trust in God—they were sisters in the Lord.

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Hung Meng's onboarding meeting took place on the opposite side of the world, in Saudi Arabia. He offered control and power to three long-bearded recruits, all wearing black Hijabs with small slits for their eyes. It was easy to find new colleagues, where death to infidels was openly preached. Death to the United States was even a bigger prize. These three devout Sunni men believed that women should be stoned for adultery. According to the Quran, these devout Muslim men could have multiple wives.

Mr. Meng's belief system wasn't Muslim, Christian, Hindu, Buddhist, or Jewish. He knew that death to the love-patriots was a necessity. You need willing turncoats to foster hate! Finding a willing recruit to cut off a hand or a head without hesitation was what he'd come halfway around the world for.

Tim Baylor was on Mr. Meng's recruitment roster; it would take time to get Tim to the killing fields. Tina would be Tim's first sacrifice. Jealousy isn't on the seven deadly sins list, but pride is. Tim Baylor was king of pride. All Hung Meng would have to do is

mix jealousy with pride, and Tim would be his next soldier. There was one thing that could get Tim killed before he marched on to the battlefield of evil—mentioning Y2K when he was selling his antivirus services.

Y2K was the code letters that would bring the United States to its knees. At the turn of the twenty-first century, three suitcase nuclear bombs would go off in California, killing thousands and irradiating millions. Simultaneously, the Y2K BIOS root-level virus would be released at an academic and business data center. All the good the United States had built over the past two hundred years would implode. At last, the prophecy that the United States would collapse from within would be fulfilled.

Trask Inc. was an essential piece to the puzzle. The long-forgotten training tunnel would be for a future homeland attack. It was top secret when it was built in December of 1942. The only living project engineer was touring Mexico in an old motorhome. Gus had put together his own detailed engineering manual, which Kevin had put somewhere.

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The Friday meeting with insurance negotiators, lawyers, and other representatives began with Condi taking a place at the head of the table. Robert Trask was at the opposite end of the elegant conference table. Mr. Hung Meng and Myung Chan were sitting with their backs to the window overlooking Long Beach Harbor. A hefty woman dressed in slacks and a business jacket sat directly across from Hung Meng. Her young male counterpart sat across from Myung Chan. Kevin and Patty sat on either side of Condi, facing each other. The Trask insurance adjustors sat on both sides of Robert Trask. There were no attorneys representing the Shultz family.

Kevin stood and opened the meeting. "Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for all being here. I'm sure everyone in this room is aware of the tort insurance claims that lawyers file. Many attorneys are more concerned with billing hours than settling claims." Kevin forced a fake grin. "With that said, I will let Condi Johnson take over."

"Thank you, Kevin," Condi said and stood, picking up a stack of stapled papers. "Patty, would you pass these out?" She waited as Patty circled the long conference table, passing out the packets. "The first page is a breakdown of how much money Aflex insurance has spent to date trying to dig up dirt and demonstrate that Mr. Shultz has a drinking problem."

This was the first time Robert had seen the packet. He flipped through the photos on the back and then to the meeting agenda.

Condi paused for everyone to look over her figures. "Take notice of the combined billable hours for two lawyers, along with fees for the private eye that flew out to Michigan three different times."

The Aflex insurance claims analyst, sitting to the right of Mr. Trask, jumped in. "Your estimate is way too low! To date, we have spent over four hundred and eighty thousand dollars fighting the bogus Ann Marie Shultz's claim."

"Thank you for the more accurate information," Condi replied and then flipped to the second page. "So, if the Shultz family was paid eight hundred dollars a week for ten years, what would be the difference between fighting or paying the claim?"

Patty jotted down the new number the claims analyst offered and quickly calculated. "Per the new number just offered by Aflex insurance analyst." Patty double checked her calculation and then continued. "Aflex insurance has already spent sixty-four thousand dollars fighting, rather than if they had just paid the original eight hundred dollars a week for the physical therapy."

"Thanks, Patty." Condi looked over at Patty and gave a head nod for approval.

"If we go to court, our expenses could be two or three times more." The senior Aflex insurance adjuster stated from the far end of the table.

Condi glared down the long conference table, first at Mr. Robert Trask and then at the senior Aflex insurance adjuster. "Well then! Wouldn't it be a more prudent decision to start paying them off? They need the money for physical therapy for their daughter, Ann Marie, now, not some time in the future."

"That insurance money will probably be used for booze by her drunkard father. We plan to prove that Mr. Shultz is a low-life drunk in court," the Aflex insurance official said.

"Well, sir, our private eye didn't find any evidence that Mr. Schultz has a drinking problem. Mr. Schultz has a valid driver's license. Our private eye also found out that Ann Marie is past the age of being required to use a child seat."

"That might be true, but they should have been using one of those recommended booster seats. And we have on record that Mr. Shultz has a driving while intoxicated ticket on record," the insurance adjuster added.

"And how long ago did Mr. Shultz get the DWI?" Condi asked with a scowl.

"I think it was seven or eight years ago. But it won't matter in court. Statistics prove that once a drunk, always a drunk."

"I got a DWI a while ago!" Now Patty scowled and blurted out. "I'm not a drunk!"

"Okay, okay, let's all calm down." Robert Trask intervened. "We all want the same outcome here. We need to get this matter settled ASAP. The sale of Trask Inc. is contingent on no outstanding litigation."

"Aflex is prepared to offer the girl's family five thousand to make the lawsuit go away. We could even go up to ten grand."

"I'd like to talk to the Trask private eye," the adjuster said. "Looking at this PI report, his findings are weighed for the Shultz family."

Kevin jumped up in disgust. "That would be me! I'm the private eye that flew out to Michigan to meet the Shultz family." He went on to lambast Aflex Insurance. Keven turned the tone of the meeting to pawns against kings.

Robert Trask finally adjourned the meeting with a handshake of reconciliation with the insurance agents.

WTF, Condie thought. In disgust, she gathered up paperwork and left the conference room. Now more determined to leave Trask Inc. ASAP.

Chap 26——————Redwood Soak Tub

Cutting off a thief's left hand is used to discourage theft in the Middle East. In communist China, sex-selective abortions prevent girls like Condi or Patty from ever having the opportunity to speak the truth--especially in a conference room dominated by men. North Korea promotes young prison guards who instill fear and are good at crowd control. When Myung Chan strangled a political prisoner with a piece of barbed wire fence, one of the barbs ripped across his right palm. Myung's scar proved his loyalty to the Korean People's Army. Just flash his open right hand, and the most militant political prisoner would hold back their slightest rant.

That deep need to strangle again was fueled by the sick child pornography that Tim Baylor exposed Myung to on the internet. Social media was also responsible for posting thousands of prepubescent girls taking part in beauty pageants. Displaying a pure innocent child like a call girl boosted site hits; more importantly, it increased advertising revenue. Addiction overpowers a soul, and even the strong in spirit will commit horrific acts and leave a trail of carelessness, primal acts.

Triple XXX streaming videos are all over the World Wide Web—but there was no internet in North Korea. China and other communist countries filter and block WI-FI signals from outside their country. Exposing over a billion people to freedom of thought would be like exposing the masses to the tree of knowledge—life would never be the same. Mr. Meng's main objective was to destroy the exponentially expanding WWW. The Y2K virus would ensure that good information and truth could not be spread.

Tim Baylor's mini camcorder was a safe way to watch homemade X-rated movies without leaving a digital fingerprint. Showing off his college girl conquests was safe except for the night he got knocked out. Myung Chan got to see the tape of Tina and Tim in Mexico, the trip when Tim was purchasing more

Rohypnol. The newest tape of Lilly in the motel room was at the Sacramento police station inside a broken 8mm camcorder; there wasn't anything incriminating on it anyway. Unbeknownst to Tim, Hung Meng was making his own special tape of screaming and control with Myung Chan being the leading actor. This graphic tape included mutilation but not death. This video would make or break an alliance with the newt Baylor Anti-virus on-site maintenance upstart.

Trask Inc. had been on Hung Meng's make-it-happen list for over three years. With the continual decline in trailer production, Robert Trask grew more nervous each day. Hung Meng decided to increase the earnest money; his new investors had plenty of oil money. Kevin was MIA, and so was Patty.

Robert got a message from the Hawaii property management firm that someone was using the company condominium. He needed someone to run the $20 million increase in earnest money, so he pushed the call button on the desk phone.

"Shut my door and take a chair," Robert Trask said.

"Yes, sir," Condi replied and did as ordered.

"Condi, I do not like the fact that behind my back, you gathered statistics and reliability data on brake light problems on Trask trailers."

"Sorry about that," Condi replied while taking a deep breath. "But, if you had listened to CP or other foremen down on the floor, maybe that family in Michigan would not have crashed into the back of one of your trailers."

Robert Trask's face turned red. "The past week, I've been running over what I need to do. Mr. Meng increased his offer."

"I know that you will do the right thing," Condi replied in a sincere tone.

Robert picked up a PI report. "According to some recent information, it looks like you have been sending out your resume. Is that because we terminated your dad?"

"No, my dad slept with that whore auditor you hired. He needed to be terminated. I'm glad he's up in Oregon."

"Condi, you don't know the whole story. That woman literally lost her head in that horrific car accident," Robert Trask replied.

"She was still a whore," Condi quipped, not caring if she got fired. "I started looking for work elsewhere mainly because of the pending sale. If they outsource all the manufacturing to China, I need to cover my butt. I got a son to think about."

"How is Ali?" Robert asked. "He's sure getting big. I saw him trying to pedal Gus's three-wheeler around the parking lot the other day."

"Yes, Sir, Ali is growing fast. I'm planning on getting him a bike with training wheels. But if we move up to Silicon Valley, He'll have to wait."

"So, is that where you're planning to go to work?" Robert asked.

"I have an offer at a new upstart virus protection company. Actually, Myung Chan told me about the position," Condi replied with brute honesty.

"Would it help if I doubled your salary for you to stay on here?" Robert Trask asked as he let the personnel information papers drop onto the desk.

"Ah… I thought you called me in here to terminate me."

"Terminate you?" Mr. Trask turned to look out the window at a mega-cargo ship entering the Long Beach harbor. "I need you to get us through the pending sale? I'll even give you a two-year paid-up severance package if you stay on and help wrap things up."

"Sure, with an offer like that, I'd be a fool to leave," Condi replied

"Your raise starts immediately." Robert stood and extended a handshake to Condi. "Linda and I are flying down to our condo in Mexico for the rest of the week. If you can get the insurance offer with the Shultz's family back on the bargaining table, that would be great."

"No problem. I'll see what I can do." Condi let go of the handshake and walked to the

"I'd better see Ali riding a brand-new bike when we get back from Cabo San Lucas."

Condi hardly ever cried, but back at her desk, she had to wipe away a few tears. Robert always trusted her and respected her for getting things done—something her own father couldn't do—because she was a girl. Jabbar never did anything wrong.

Up one floor, almost the same scenario was taking place. Patty wasn't getting her salary doubled, yet she couldn't control her tears. The pending honeymoon gift to Hawaii already had her emotions running so high that she kept pinching herself to make sure all the good from the last six months was really happening. Working for Kevin, meeting CP at work, getting married, and going to Hawaii for eight days.

Patty offered to put off the honeymoon trip till after the Shultz insurance claim was settled, but Kevin insisted. The tentative plan was for Kevin to go to Oregon to help fill in for CP until the following week. Lilly would load and haul logs to the mill; all Kevin had to do was be a Nubber.

Robert and Kevin agreed that Condi could run everything while they were both gone. Kevin had only been there for six

months, and Condi always ran things in Robert's absence for the last ten years anyway. A couple of weeks for both sides to cool off and get things in order before the next land sale meeting would be a good thing. After Kevin spent a week or so up in Oregon, he'd come back and work day and night, get the union contract settled—he even had a plan to get Gus to move out of the corner apartment.

Patty had everything neatly piled or in folders on her desk and showed Condi where to find anything she might need. Condi privately shared that she wasn't taking the job up in Silicon Valley. Their joy-filled and excited voices floated into Kevin's office. He was also feeling good about doing something different for a week. Kevin was not exactly sure what being a Nubber was about. But working in the woods would be so much better than being stuck behind a desk.

Kevin was arranging documents and contracts into neat little piles on his desk when he got distracted by a shadow and looked up.

"Kevin, I can't thank you enough for all the good that has come my way since that night we spent together on Shasta Lake," Patty said, stepping into the doorway with her jacket and purse in hand.

Kevin stood up and then walked over to her. "Well then, I guess I need to thank God for bringing us together. There is no way Trask Inc. would be where we are at if it were not for you." Kevin put his hand on Patty's shoulder, turned her around, and shoved her out the door. "Now get out of here and have a wonderful honeymoon!"

Patty practically floated down the stairs and across the parking lot. Gus gave her a big hug and wished her and CP Godspeed.

Kevin continued to arrange papers on his desk when something flashed inside his skull. It was almost as strong a feeling as hearing the recording of Benny's voice over the mobile phone. Kevin rushed down the stairs and ran across the parking lot to the guard shack. "Did you see Patty?"

Gus pointed toward Nimitz Road. "Yes. I did see Patty. She got on the bus about two minutes ago."

Kevin turned and ran toward his car, hoping to catch up with the bus. The moment he put the key in the ignition, the mobile phone rang. Kevin yanked the handset from the bag. "Hello."

"Mr. Trask, the fishing brochure was delivered this morning." Officer Bull's deep raspy voice was noted. "The handprint you lifted off your windshield matched the print on the fiberglass resin can."

This was the second time the mobile phone delivered an unexplainable message that felt like God-speak. "Are you sure? Are you positive it is the same handprint?"

"I'm sure as if I was tracking a bear with a marking across its front paw. The scar across the palm of the print you mailed is an exact match to the one at the Redding Police Department."

"You're sure?" Kevin asked a second time.

"If you need, I can send both prints to a lab in Denver if you want a hundred percent confirmation," Bull replied and then noticed a couple of *clicks.* Bull thought the clicks were from the new front desk girl at the Warm Springs Tribal Affairs building, pushing the wrong line buttons.

Kevin didn't notice the clicks; he was brain-numbed. It was God-speak again! "Bull, can you keep both those hand prints safe? I'm going to be working with Kenneth and Richard this week. I guess I'm going to be their Nubber."

"Okay…" Bull replied. "I'll put the handprints in our evidence file cabinet." So, we'll meet up next week.

"Sounds good." Kevin put the handset back into the bag. Bull hung up the desk phone at the tribal office. Mr. Meng stopped the cassette recorder. Any evidence that could lead back to the Y2K mission had to be removed and dealt with immediately. A filing cabinet could be opened with a prybar.

Kevin's mind was at full speed in spiritual God-speak. First, it was Tina's knee that had mysteriously dialed the marina phone number, and now, a matching handprint confirmed over invisible airwaves—two signs in less than a month.

Tuesday morning, Kevin got a late start and made it to San Jose just after six. The phone GPS unit worked better than it did at the beginning of summer on the drive up to the houseboat party. Kevin found Tina's new apartment without any problem. The studio apartment was almost as small as a dorm room. She explained to Kevin that it was only temporary and that when her first commission check came in, she planned to rent a house with a big backyard and a pool. Tina didn't share that Tim had rented the apartment and given her barely enough money for food and gas.

"I can only stay an hour or so," Kevin said as he tried to find a comfortable spot on the fold-up bed.

"Like, we should go get something to eat. I've been selling Y2K virus protection all day," Tina said with a fake smile.

"Let's do that," Kevin jumped at the chance to get out of the claustrophobic, tiny flat.

"Kevin, you can spend the night here and head up to Oregon in the morning."

"Thanks." Kevin was already at the door. "I start my training tomorrow."

"Training for what?" Tina asked as she locked the apartment door.

"Logger training!" Kevin answered and puffed up his chest.

At dinner, Tina talked about the $18,000 in virus protection software she had sold that day and said she expected a 50% commission check by Friday. Kevin only heard every other word; he was fixated on meeting Officer Bull Elk. That handprint with a scar across the palm was surely help from above. he was thinking of different ways to double-check his speculation. *Maybe another game of tennis? Afterward, I'll hand Myung Chan a new tennis racket and ask how he likes the new grip. I'll snatch it back, and bingo, I'll have a good sweaty handprint.*

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Kevin didn't even get three hours of sleep before he heard kicking on the bottom of door **5** at the Zigzag Inn. "You ready to start logging?" Lilly asked with cups of coffee in each hand.

"Yeah, come on in while I get a shower." Kevin groggily said as he stepped back.

"Skip the shower," Lilly said and stepped into the motel room.

"Okay, should I put on the logging stuff Patty got for me?" Kevin pointed at a bag and a box on the floor.

Lilly looked through the bag and tossed a heavy pair of overalls to Kevin and then a bright yellow sweatshirt. "Put this stuff on," she said, and then bent over and pulled the new cork boots out of the large shoebox.

The first thing Kevin noticed was that the boots had steel spikes on the bottom. The second thing he noticed was that Lilly was only wearing a white cotton tank top under her bib overalls. Kevin's man brain flashed back to the last time Lilly and he were in a motel room. "I'll put this stuff on in the bathroom." Kevin took most everything except the corks

"I see that Patty found you buckskin gloves as I suggested," Lilly yelled through the bathroom door as she examined the hard hat with the Trask Trailer logo. "I see you brought protection from home. I got some too, just in case."

Kevin slightly opened the bathroom door. "What?"

"You know that all-important head protection." Lilly chided and then stuck the Trask hard hat through the slightly open door.

"Oh… I get it!" Kevin shook his head and laughed.

"What did you think I meant?" Lilly pulled the bathroom door shut and laughed to herself.

The bantering, the sexual innuendos, and light flirting would have been considered sexual harassment anywhere else—but this was everyday logging jargon. Kevin didn't mind Lilly's teasing; she was a great instructor. When it came to safety, there was no joking around. After three days, Kevin was scampering up fallen Douglas firs with his new corks, almost like he was driving a basketball key for a layup. By Friday lunchtime, Kevin's back ached so badly from nubbing limbs that he wanted to know where the closest club with a hot tub was.

Ken opened the truck's side utility box and pulled out a thirty-inch chain and an extended bar. "For a city-boy, you learned nubbing fast. You might try this extended chain-and-bar. It's easier on the back."

Richard, Kenneth, and Lilly all laughed in unison.

"It's not funny!" Kevin took the accessories from Richard. "Can you help me install this stuff?"

"Lilly can after lunch. I got a widow-maker I want to get down."

"Widow-maker, what the hell is that?"

Richard didn't answer the question but did say, "We got an old redwood soak tub out behind the cabin. Lilly can show you how to fire it up if you want."

"A redwood soak tub, what is that?" Kevin asked, not expecting an answer.

"It's an old redwood tub that is heated by firewood," Lilly answered.

There was a long pause as everyone gobbled down lunch.

"Did you get the bees' nest out of your old family cabin?" Richard asked.

"Yeah, I used a can of that bee killer that you tenderfoots think you can also use for bear spray. I fixed the broken window, too."

The broken window words silenced Kenneth. He started digging through the picnic basket. "Who wants a piece of Mary's apple pie?"

"I thought I heard a bear up there our first night here. Richard said."

"Yeah, just them brown bears. They don't eat humans." Kenneth started passing out the pieces of apple pie, individually wrapped in aluminum foil. "But you don't want to get the Mama bear mad if she has her cubs around."

"That's good to know," Richard replied and took a bite of pie.

"Hey, nubber boy, maybe you want to go lake fishing with us after church on Sunday?"

"Yeah, maybe," Kevin replied. "Lilly still owes me a fishing lesson."

"I don't lake fish from a boat. It's for old men." Lilly injected.

Kevin was on the same page as Lilly. "I'll have to pass on the lake fishing. I'm meeting up with Bull Elk to see about doing some helicopter logging up on Mt. Jefferson. That'd be good work for the Rez people." Kenneth pulled a can of chew from the buttoned pocket of his flannel shirt. "CP and Bull had been talking about that a lot last week. CP knows a pilot from Desert Storm who flies an old gutted-out Chinook Helicopter."

"Those old twin-bladed Chinooks were workhorses during Vietnam. They could haul more than fifty troops or thirty casualties on liters, depending on how they were configured." Richard stopped and glanced down.

"You fought in Nam?" Kenneth asked.

"Yeah, two tours, Army," Richard quipped and then looked off into the distance.

"Thanks for your service for the good old USA," Kenneth said.

"What about you?" Richard turned back and looked directly at Kenneth.

"They wouldn't take me. They said I had an enlarged heart. But I think it was because I couldn't fill out the paperwork." Kenneth put a wad of chew in his mouth.

"Probably best…" Richard paused and then replied. "The Viet Cong guerrillas were masters of improvised weaponry. Before attacking, they sometimes would throw nests of hornets and wasps into our outposts. I got stung five times in one day before a fight." Richard turned back to looking off; it was evident that he didn't want to talk anymore.

Finally, Richard spit out a spat of chew, stood up and said, "Let's try to get all the trees felled from here to milepost thirty-nine before quitting time today."

Lilly loaded and hauled two full loads of Douglas fir over the Mount Hood Summit in just less than three hours. With the longer chainsaw bar, Kevin was nubbing limbs almost twice as fast. He'd also graduated to bucking the logs into twenty-one-foot sections. He was now an apprentice bucker and a fully-fledged nubber. Two days off to deal with all his aches, a sore back, and to sleep in past 4:30 am was sounding good.

Richard jumped out in front of the third fully loaded log truck and gave the slashing hand signal in front of his neck. Lilly shut down the rumbling diesel motor, opened the door,

and stood on the running board. "I can still make it to the mill before they close down for the weekend."

"Not worth it. Too much Friday night traffic headed to Central Oregon." Kenneth pointed toward Highway 26.

"Okay, I'll chock the wheels and lock up the cab."

"You ought to tell Paul Bunyan over there that we're shutting it down." Kenneth pointed at Kevin, who was working himself up the trunk of a fallen tree. "Maybe logger boy wants to have a beer with Rich and me."

Lilly walked alongside the debranched, nubbed tree and watched Kevin cut through the trunk of the beetle-infested old-growth Douglas fir. When he let off the throttle and the chain stopped spinning, she tapped him on the shoulder.

Kevin immediately hit the kill switch, just like she had taught him.

Lilly lifted one side of Kevin's ear muffs. "We're shutting down for the weekend."

"Okay," Kevin looked over his shoulder. Kenneth and Richard were loading up the Saxton's work trucks. "What a difference this longer saw makes."

"So, is your back still sore?" Lilly asked.

"Not as bad, not being bent over sure helps," Kevin replied. "I'd still like to use that soak tub if you can show me how to get it fired up."

"Sure, but Dad wants to know…" Lilly stopped herself mid-sentence, jumped off the downed tree, and hurried off.

From out of hearing distance, the three talked for about a minute; then both Richard and Kenneth waved up the hill at Kevin. They got in the utility truck and then turned west onto Highway 26.

Kevin was loading up the old yellow truck when Lilly approached. "What was it that your dad wanted to know?" Kevin asked while putting a can of gas/oil mix into the pickup's bed.

"Ah…" Lilly paused to make up her story, "Dad wanted to know if the corks fit okay. He said you have tender feet and mentioned the blisters last time you wore new boots, and that you might need to soak your feet."

The long, drawn-out answer sounded fishy, but Kevin didn't care. All he wanted was to soak in hot water and not have to get up before the sun came up. Kevin pulled himself up into the old pickup. "I should have driven the Range Rover so that you don't have to drive me all over."

"I don't mind," Lilly replied and started the old truck.

"Lilly, could you stop at a wine shop. I want to get a bottle of Cabernet Sauvignon, some aged Cheddar, and crackers."

I don't know anything about wine. Kevin's going to think I'm a hick if I stop at the grocery store. "There's a wine and gift shop in Government Camp. Do you want me to stop there?"

"Sounds good." Kevin took off his hard hat and ran his finger through his reddish-blond hair to push out the sawdust. "That's the hardest three days I've ever worked." He then rested his head on the back of the seat and closed his eyes.

It wasn't even thirty minutes before Lilly blurted out, "We're here!"

Kevin opened his eyes and focused on the storefront of the trendy wine-and-gift shop. "Are you coming in?"

"No, I'll wait here," Lilly answered, not wanting to embarrass herself with her lack of knowledge about fine wine.

This time, it was Lilly who was awakened when Kevin opened the heavily worn-out passenger door of the truck. He slid a big brown bag across the bench seat. In his other hand, he lifted a big gift basket. "I got your mom a wine basket for making my lunch for the last three days." Kevin put the gift basket next to the brown bag and pulled himself in.

"That was nice," Lilly immediately smelled garlic wafting up from the brown bag next to her. "Something smells good."

Kevin pulled a bagel from the paper bag, tore off a piece, and put it up to Lilly's lips. "Try this fresh garlic bagel."

Lilly scarped a giant bite, getting Kevin's fingers. They both laughed and finished the bagel on the road to the Saxtons' family cabin.

Kevin vaguely remembered the bumpy ride into the remote cabin. The old, dead snag out front of the A-frame looked familiar. Lilly jumped from the truck and yelled, "I'll get a fire going. It takes about forty-five minutes for the water to get hot." She disappeared around the left side of the cabin.

The cabin front door didn't have a lock. Kevin went in and unpacked the wine, cheese, crackers, some fresh apples, and three more bagels. He couldn't find any wine glasses, so the blue enameled coffee cups became the vessels to hold the two-hundred-dollar-a-bottle wine. By the time Lilly came into the cabin, Kevin had everything laid out on the small green table.

"Okay, I got a fire going in the heater box." Lilly noticed the items on the table.

"How about a glass of Cabernet Sauvignon and cheddar?" Kevin held out a blue, white-speckled camping cup.

"Sure," Lilly replied and took the cup.

"And a toast," Kevin clicked his cup against Lilly's cup. "A toast that I finally got to use the man's chainsaw today."

Lilly laughed and literally took a twenty-five-dollar gulp. "This is delicious wine."

Kevin put a small piece of cheese in Lilly's mouth. "It really takes the sharpness off the cheddar."

The forty-five-minute wait for the soak tub to heat up left enough time to finish the first bottle of wine. The snacks helped somewhat, but another 30 minutes in the heated water counteracted any sobering effect. Just as the sun was setting, Lilly went back inside to get the other bottle of wine. For an unknown reason, she broke out a glass pane of the front cabin window.

The sun's yellow rays mixed with the dimming blue sky; the combined colors cast an orange cast on Mt. Hood. The soak tube was cooling off fast as the cool fall night air settled in. "We'd better get out, dried off, and get back before your parents start to worry." Kevin crawled out first and started to dry off. The cold chills hit him like a blast of Arctic air.

"Oh, they won't worry. But if I drive after drinking, they'll be mad." Lilly swung her long leg over the side of the redwood tub and grabbed the other towel. She pulled her wet cotton underwear and bra off; they hit the wooden deck with a splat. "You'd better get your wet boxers off if you want to quit shaking."

Kevin reached under the towel and pulled off his boxer briefs. "I've got to go inside, I'm freezing."

Go ahead, I'll shut up stuff out here, Lilly fastened the large beach towel above her bare breasts.

Kevin scampered across the wooden deck and into the cabin. It was as cool as the outside air. He started to shake more; his teeth began to chatter—Deja vu.

Lilly finally came through the door. "Oh, it's cold in here… Why don't you head upstairs and crawl under the blankets? I'll build a fire."

Unlike last time, and back in the same bunk, alcohol was a different reason for shivering—not hypothermia. Kevin would have uncontrollably shaken himself to death that night up on Mt. Hood if Kenneth Saxton hadn't found him. This night, there was no Tucker, and yet Kevin felt warmth up against his bare back. Eight hours of rock-hard sleep was what Kevin needed. The smell of brewing coffee and the dry heat from the fireplace slowly pulled Kevin from one of the best dreams that he had ever had.

It was past nine before they made it back to the guide shop parking lot. Kevin grabbed onto the wine basket and hopped out of the truck. *Maybe this gift basket will be a peace offering, since Lilly didn't make it home last night.*

Kenneth Saxton came out of the door, spat some chew onto the gravel, and then said. "You all drink too much? Not to be able to drive home last night?"

Lilly ran up and hugged Kenneth. "Yeah, we drank almost two bottles of wine."

"You done good, young lady," Kenneth spat out more chew and whispered. "Remember, honey, you are no one's concubine."

Kevin was now standing on the bottom stair, holding the gift basket. "I got something for Mary, for making all my lunches."

"She's inside making meatloaf," Kenneth said as he lumbered down the stairs and went around to his shop at the back of the building.

The guide shop door hadn't even closed, and Tucker was jumping at the gift pack; he could smell the different cheese packs. Mary came down the hall and around the display case. "I hope you'll come to dinner tonight?"

"Can I let you know after I talk with Officer Bull? He was looking into something for me. I don't know how long our meeting will last." Kevin walked over to Mary and held out the gift basket. "This is for you."

"Thank you so much," Mary said while looking at three different bottles of wine. "This Zinfandel or even the Pinot Noir will go well with the new meatloaf we're trying."

Lilly often wished she were as sophisticated as her mother and frequently probed Mary for stories of when she was a worldly stewardess. "I'm going to go help Dad sharpen the chainsaws." Lilly was gone just like that. It was her defense mechanism—she knew she would never be someone of Kevin's class or stature.

"Well then, Kevin, dinners at six, I hope that you can make it."

It was only a short walk over to the Zigzag Motel. Before going into his room, Kevin opened the passenger door on the SL600 and tried the bag phone.

"Kevin, I'm glad you called," Bull's deep Indian voice came over the handset. "Can we meet up in the Timberline Lodge parking lot about three this afternoon? I need to do my last patrol drive through around about then."

"Sure, I'll get a shower and make a few calls and then meet you up there."

"I hope we can get this helicopter logging project underway. It would really help the Rez to clean out and manage our forest."

"Whatever I can do. It could be a win-win for a bunch of people." Kevin replied.

"I went ahead and sent those handprints to an independent crime lab we use. I knew that they were a match. The criminologist said she would also run the fingerprints to see if they matched anything in their database."

Kevin's mind jumped into a different gear. "Bull, if I sent you a tennis racket, could you have the crime lab see if that handprint matches the other two?"

"Maybe?" Now, Officer Bull's mind shifted into a different gear. "So, we think the handprint that was on your windshield probably matches the one on the fiberglass can that the young boy, Benny, supposedly was sniffing from?" Bull paused and then continued. "Are you saying that you might know who these prints belong to?"

"I might…" Kevin replied as an uneasy feeling came over the phone. "Bull, when we meet up in the Timberline Lodge parking lot, I'll let you in on a hunch that I have."

"See you at three," Bull replied. There was a third *click* after they both hung up!

Kevin showered in the tiny motel room and could smell the chlorine from the soaking tub as it washed down the drain. *Last night was another blurred-out night up in that A-frame cabin with Lilly. Her disdain for families like mine is apparent. Last night, there was something about Lilly's immodest, brashness that was compelling. Her father is right; no woman should be treated like someone's concubine. I'm glad Grandpa taught me about self-control…*

It was easier to call from the mobile car phone than to place a long-distance phone call from a motel room; there was no sixteen-digit credit card number to enter or operator assistance necessary. Kevin hit the redial button, and for some unknown reason, Benny's recording played. Kevin listened to the entire recording.

He hit the redial button again. This time, it dialed the private Trask line. "Condi, sorry for calling on the weekend."

"Kevin, don't worry about it. You know that I'm always here for Trask Inc." Condi's voice came over the handset.

"Dad told me that you were sending out your resume. I bug you enough after hours and on the weekends. I hope that's not why you're looking for work elsewhere?"

"Since Robert doubled my salary, I don't think I will be going anywhere soon."

"I'm glad that increase convinced you to stay on,"

"It will for the time being. So, what do you need?" Condi asked.

"Could you get in touch with Mr. Myung Chan and set up a tennis match between just him and me?"

"I can do that," Condi replied. "I think they are playing a threesome this next week at the Pebble Beach golf course. I'll try to get a hold of Myung Chan out there. If not, I have Mr. Hung Meng's contact number on my Rolodex at work."

"Thanks, Condi. I'm so glad that you are staying on." Kevin hung up, Condi hung up, and then there was a noticeable third *click*...

Kevin found Tina's phone number for the new studio apartment and dialed. Tim Baylor answered the phone! Kevin immediately shoved the handset back into the phone bag. *That's weird, Tina told me that she and Tim were over. I need to take a walk…*

About a half mile west, down Highway 26, was a grocery store. The total length of the town of Zigzag was less than a mile. Walking to a grocery store was something Kevin never did. No way would the Pasadena Homeowners Association allow a commercial business in or near their private community. The brisk walk at the three-thousand-foot elevation felt good. Tim answering Tina's phone was disconcerting. Yet Kevin was really focused on… *What if Myung's handprint is a match?*

With coffee in one hand and a donut in the other, Kevin stopped at a roadside vendor selling fresh-cut flowers. He stuffed the donut in his mouth and gave the vendor a twenty. Zigzag had the feel of a tiny Aspen, Colorado, before all the snobs and elitists. The vine maples were popping with their red and yellow fall colors. The road up to Timberline Lodge had the same feel as Trinity Loop Road at the base of Mt. Shasta. In the back of Kevin's mind, he was tucking away a goal to climb most of the Cascade peaks—Mount Hood, Mount Shasta, and others were on the list.

Bull had the police cruiser pulled in backward in the usual place. The parking lot had about 50 spots filled. Once the snow falls, it will be impossible to find a spot on a Saturday. Downhill skiing had been off Kevin's list ever since his basketball scholarship. Large crowds and long lines were not something Kevin did well with. Mountain climbing, with its do-or-die allure, required solitude or, at most, one other team member*. I wonder if Bull Elk has climbing experience?*

Kevin parked beside the police car. Bull approached the SL600 holding a large manila envelope. "That was nice that you bought me flowers."

Kevin laughed as he stood on the other side of the SL600 that he'd lowered the top on. "I got them for the dinner table tonight at the Saxtons'."

"Mary is one great cook," Bull replied. "I always liked sleeping over at Billy's; she makes the best venison breakfast burritos."

Kevin's eyes immediately focused on Crater's Peak about halfway up Mt Hood, at about the eight-thousand-foot level. "I still feel guilty about losing Billy's crampon up there." Kevin squinted; it looks like an eagle is circling way up there…

"Here are all the permits and legal documents to log in Mt. Jefferson wilderness area," Bull handed the large envelope across the open car area.

"I'll give this stuff to Patty; she'll be back from Hawaii this Friday." Kevin leaned in and put the large document envelope behind the seat next to the flowers; he grabbed a small complimentary motel guest pad and handed it to Bull.

Bull looked at the small motel notepad. "Are these the names that you would like me to have checked out?"

"Yeah, I don't know if you will have any luck. Patty tried to run a background check on LinkedIn, but nothing came back. I know that Myung Chan is from North Korea, but I'm not sure about Hung Meng."

"Didn't you tell me that this car is registered to Mr. Hung Meng or to an import company or something?" Officer Bull asked.

"Yeah," Kevin replied and walked toward the trunk. "I'll read off the license plate to you."

Bull wrote down the information. "Give me about a week to run this information."

From behind, Kevin felt a strange pull; he turned and was now looking south at Mt. Jefferson. "Bull, you told me once that I would need to get a permit to climb that mountain."

"If you climb from the east side, you do. The private east access trailhead is on Reservation property."

"I might do that next summer," Kevin said. "Are you a climber?"

"I climbed a little with Billy before he died up here." Bull turned and motioned north with his arm up toward the summit of Mt. Hood. "I can hardly even hike these days; ever since I got full-blown diabetes. You know Native Americans are twice as likely to get diabetes as paleface folk."

"Sorry, Bull," Kevin replied, feeling that he needed to apologize for being white. At least it wasn't the wealth guilt trip Lilly constantly implied. "I didn't know that fact about diabetes. I feel bad for your people."

Bull sensed Kevin's apologetic tone. "Hey, it's not your fault. I blame myself. Thirty-two-ounce soda and fast food."

"Yeah, I hear you," Kevin replied. Not aware that fast food was the daily staple for most underprivileged Americans, mainly because of its value. Marie always prepared healthy meals for the Saxton family and always packed him a nutritious lunch during his development years.

"I'm off tomorrow if you want to take a ride up to the Mount Jefferson trailhead. I could show you the area that hopefully, we can get a helicopter into to remove some diseased trees."

They planned to meet at the Warm Spring Police Station at 7 AM, and Bull headed back there. He was off shift in an hour. Kevin had lost track of the time, but Lilly hadn't; she had looked out the front window of the guide shop at least five times. Like an arrow, Lilly shot from the storefront, down the hall into the kitchen, and started moving plates around on the table.

"I told you he'd come," Mary said as she put the meatloaf on a platter.

Kenneth had just come out of his shop and was wiping his hands off with a red shop rag when he met up with Kevin on the porch. "I hope you're hungry!" Ken opened the door and herded Kevin down the hall.

"I got these for the table." Kevin held out fresh-cut flowers.

Mary handed the flowers to Lilly, "Dear, could you put these in a vase?"

Lilly put her nose to the bunched flowers and sniffed. She liked being called dear; it made her feel like a young girl.

Ken pulled the small table away from the wall and spoke. "Let's pray. I'm hungry."

"You can sit there." Lilly pointed at the spot directly across from her dad.

Kevin sat down and mimicked Kenneth's palms-up position. Lilly and Mary sat across from each other, and they joined hands.

"Thank You, Lord, for our food. Thank you for bringing work my way, and bless all my new lumberjack friends," Kenneth said

"Please look after Lilly on her trip to our great capital, Washington, D.C. In your name I pray," Mary added.

In unison, "Amens," by everyone—except Lilly.

Chap 27————— Y2K

Sunday is church day for many people. Even Richard Johnson was attending church with the Saxtons. Not to be converted; he was there to go fishing afterward with Kenneth and Fr. Jude, a Nigerian Priest on loan from Africa. Ever since the sacrament of Confirmation and some tragedies in Lilly's life, she had become poor in Spirit, only attending Mass maybe once a month. This Sunday, she and Patty were shopping for clothes for her trip back east. Lilly kept insisting that her guide outfit would be effective to testify in. Patty agreed but insisted on getting some casual clothes for sightseeing and some stuff for the hotel spa and pool.

Kevin had been to church three or four times since Grandpa Trask died. This Sunday, he was in the best church that there is—the great outdoors. The private, sacred land Bull Elk was showing Kevin was hallowed ground. Two miles before the trailhead, there was a gate across the red cinder road. This heavy six-inch pipe took both Bull's and Kevin's strength to swing open. Bull immediately started to point out the infestation of white fir that had taken over the native trees. This was a forest where Douglas fir from the north met Ponderosa Pines from the south. There was a patch of old-growth Cedars concealed in the cool, damp shadow of Mt. Jefferson. Some of the trees were almost ten feet in diameter and older than the United States.

About one mile past the gate, a green, damp moss covered the road. Officer Bull stopped, shut off the patrol car, and said, "We'll walk from here."

When Kevin opened the door, he heard the sound of a rushing river down in the canyon from the passenger side of the patrol car. The vegetation and forest were so dense with ferns, moss, and underbrush that he could not see the river below. "So, this must be the Slot Canyon that you have been telling me about?" Kevin asked as Bull Elk came around the car.

"It is, and you don't want to go too far into the woods here. The canyon wall is over sixty feet high in places where the canyon narrows to less than ten feet."

"That must be an incredible hike down in there," Kevin said.

"No living man has ever been through Minne-Wakan slot canyon. Milk Creek cut this out of the earth millions of years ago. In some places, the walls are so close that the tips of an eagle's

wing can touch both sides when it soars to look over the spirits below."

"What does Minne-Wakan mean?" Kevin asked.

"It means Holy Water," Bull replied. "Some tribe members will tell you Minne-Wakan means whiskey. My father was an alcoholic, so I prefer the meaning of Holy Water."

"I understand," Kevin replied.

"So, this is why you want to stop the white fir, to save these old trees?" Kevin asked.

"If we can stop the infestation here, we will learn more about how to manage our forest. We have not been able to burn out the weak trees and underbrush for over thirty years. If a burn got out of control and burned off the Rez, it would be the Red Man's fault."

"I get it," Kevin said as he looked up the overgrown road. "After working with Kenneth's crew, I see how some environmental dimwits and politicians have screwed up forest management."

"It's Sunday, enough talk about politics. Let's hike up to the Mt Jefferson trail head." Bull opened up the trunk and got out a walking stick. About one mile up the steep incline, the trees got shorter, the green vegetation nonexistent, and the timberline was straight ahead.

Kevin could tell that Bull was struggling with every step. "Is that the climbers' sign-in up ahead?" Kevin pointed at a plank lean-to that resembled a large doghouse.

"Yeah, the climbing register is inside. You sign in with the date and time, your name, and the permit number." Bull reached into his shirt pocket, where his badge was pinned, and pulled out a climbing permit. "This permit is good for a year."

"Thanks, I have a girlfriend who wants to start climbing with me. But this mountain would be way too difficult for her." Kevin took the permit and put it in his pocket.

"Lilly climbed Mt. Jefferson several times with Billy." Bull paused, made a fist over his heart, and then moved his clenched fist in the direction of the summit. He opened his clenched fist when his arm was fully extended—it was an action to send love toward Billy's sky spirit.

Kevin did not say a word. Lilly was not the climber he was thinking of—it was Tina.

It took almost forty minutes to make it back to the patrol car. Bull was lightheaded and braced himself on the hood. "Could you get me an orange juice from the small cooler in the back seat?"

Kevin opened the small white cooler with the red first-aid cross on the lid; "DIABETIC" was stenciled on the front. He took one of the small orange juice bottles out and dashed back. "Here you go!"

Bull gulped from the eight-ounce bottle. Color immediately came back to his pale face. "I need to sit down for a moment for

the sugar to work its way through my blood." Kevin helped him back to the hood of the patrol car.

Now Kevin was the one turning pale, from fear, not hypoglycemia. "Are you going to be okay?"

"I should be." Bull replied and then asked, "Could you get me a bag of those sugar cookies out of the medical cooler?"

Keven snatched the cooler and placed it on the hood.

"Can you drive?" Bull worked himself down the passenger side and got in.

The narrow, overgrown road was too narrow to turn around. Kevin backed the patrol car all the way back to the open yellow pipe-gate.

Bull's sugar level had stabilized, but he was too weak to help move the significant yellow barrier back that blocked the road.

Kevin squatted under the six-inch crossbar and used his shoulder to lift the heavy metal back into place; he noticed a foul odor and rub marks on the yellow paint. "What are these?" Kevin pointed at the markings and rubbing.

Bull looked, then ran his hand over the substance; he cupped his hand over his nose and sniffed. "That is testosterone. A Buck or Bull Elk probably used the gate to shed his antlers."

"What?" Kevin asked, then rubbed at what looked like a brown crayon mark on the yellow-painted pipe. Kevin mimicked Bull and sniffed at the scent. "This really stinks!"

"Smells more like deer rubbing," Bull replied. "You do know that Elk and Deer shed their antlers every year?"

Kevin lowered his hands from his face and replied. "No, I didn't know that?"

"Do you know what a shed hunter is?" Bull asked

"No," Kevin replied.

Bull smiled and then started looking down at the soft dirt. "Look here." Bull pointed at some deer tracks. "Those are Deer hoof prints; if you followed them, you might find half a shed."

"Half a shed?" Kevin was lost entirely.

"Often the Bull or Buck will shed one side of their rack, and then they go into frenzy and try to rub or knock off the other side."

"Oh?" Kevin was lost.

"When you're shed hunting, you look for big limbs, rock outcroppings, or even this gate where they'll knock off the other half."

"I've learned a lot this past week about nubbin limbs and rubbing off antlers."

Bull laughed. "It's called limbing and shedding."

They spent the next hour slowly meandering around on forest roads looking for a potential helicopter landing zone. Biddle Pass was a small clearing on top of a bluff where two forest roads teed

off from each other. One road headed due east toward Warm Springs and Hwy 26. The other red cinder road headed due south toward a small town of summer cabins called Camp Sherman. At Camp Sherman, the road turned to pavement; eight miles south on the Metolius River Road is where you could play golf at the world-famous Black Butte Ranch.

"Stop over there." Bull pointed where the two roads met. "This would be a good place to drop and load logs."

"Should I shut off the patrol car or leave it running?" Kevin asked with his hand on the ignition.

"Shut it off," Bull replied. "I need to check my diabetic feet and make sure that I didn't get any blisters."

Kevin did not reply; he'd already shown his ignorance about shedding, rubbing, and nubbing. He knew very little about diabetics and the problem that they have with poor circulation and nerve feeling in their lower extremities. However, Kevin did know about helicopters, aircraft, and trailers; the clearing would be a good place to drop logs. Both roads were wide enough for dual-axle, dual-wheeled log trucks and trailers.

There were seven or eight tall dead snags. They would need to be cut down to make it safe for a helicopter to refuel. Biddle Pass Bluff offered a 360-degree view and appeared to be an ideal landing and drop zone. To the northwest, Mt. Jefferson displayed all its glory and sent out a challenge. "*I'll be back to conquer you!"* Kevin yelled from the top of the bluff. Then raised his fist to the Cascade mountains as a do-or-die threat.

Bull saw the raised fist but did not hear the challenge. A loud call rang out from one of the old snags. The sun blasted into Kevin's eyes when he turned due west; he squinted and saw a Bald Eagle perched on the broken top of an ancient Sequoia—it looked blind in one eye.

A long horn blast from the patrol car penetrated the air. Kevin sprinted to the road, jumping over brush and around an abandoned deck of logs. Bull was leaning through the driver's window. Kevin slowed to a casual walk.

"I thought you might have gotten lost," Bull said as Kevin approached.

"No, I was looking at an Eagle up there in a Sequoia. It flew off when you honked the horn," Kevin replied between breaths. "It looked blind in one eye."

"We don't want to take down many Redwoods. The Great Spirit Bird needs a high perch," Bull replied, looking west. "FYI, those giant evergreens are called Redwoods, a distant member of the Cypress family. California takes claim to the name Sequoia."

"I didn't know that," Kevin replied. "Did you know that some Bald Eagles will fly to the top of a mountain and pluck out all its

feathers and re-grow its beak and talons so to renew its life again," Kevin stated the information boldly.

"What?" Bull laughed. "You believed that myth about how the Bald Eagle grows new talons and plucks out its own feathers."

"Yeah, I watched a PowerPoint in one of my humanities college classes about how only the strong survive."

"Well, you'd better go back and do some research. That story is white man folklore. More crap that colleges are pumping into the empty gray matter of young adults," Bull quipped in a disgusted tone.

Kevin sat quietly, embarrassed and disgraced. All last week, he made statements about global warming and how clear-cutting was a major contributor to it. Kenneth often rebutted or just shook his head and walked away.

"Kevin, let me ask: did any of your college professors ever give a class on all the folklore or parables in the Bible?"

"Yes, a Nun did in a required theology and world religions course," Kevin answered with little confidence.

"Did she teach about how the Gospels were written by four different men many years after the crucifixion? Did she explain how impossible it would be for these four men to keep their stories straight after all those years?"

"Bull, I don't know what you mean? My degree was in Business Administration with a minor in Humanities. The World Religion course was a requirement when I attended Gonzaga."

"I thought you were a Blue Devil at Duke?"

"That's a long story. However, I did learn to respect all the different religions and cultures in the world at Gonzaga."

"Did they offer a religious syncretism course that included Native Americans' beliefs?" Bull asked, then looked over at a cluster of Redwood saplings. "It is better to learn from the tree of life than from the tree of knowledge," Bull professed as truth.

Kevin listened to Bull's words and chose his words carefully. "That's an interesting quote; is it a Native American belief?"

Bull grinned and then, with a straight face, said, "No, it's from Augustine of Hippo's teachings."

Kevin was silenced by thought—Augustine *of Hippo. I think we studied him in Western Philosophy. That class was during the playoffs. I missed a lot of that course, but we did win the NCAA title that year…*

In the distance, a loud squawk filtered out from the forest. Bull opened the door and got in the patrol car. Kevin followed Bull's action; when he sat down in the passenger seat, he smelled the peyote balm and noticed that Bull Elk was now wearing moccasins. On their drive away from the remote southwest corner of the Warm

Springs rez, it felt like Grandpa Trask teaching about the Tree of Life in Sunday school.

Monday morning felt like a different school; Kevin was in Log Truck driving class 101. The instructor was Lilly. Inside the loud diesel-smelling cab, Kevin gave up sharing about his Sunday outing with Bull Elk. Lilly yelled at Kevin when to downshift, and taught him when to use the exhaust brake versus the Jake brake. Kevin quickly caught on to running the self-loader. It had the same hydraulic control levers as the movable crane at Trask Inc. Moving twenty-foot steel pieces from the yard into the trailer plant was like moving twenty-foot logs. Kevin loaded Douglas firs and hauled them to the mill, with Lilly barking instructions to and from.

After lunch, Mary picked up Lilly, and they headed to Portland International Airport. Richard Johnson was training minority work crew laborers on how to nub and buck trees. Kevin completed two solo trips to the mill before quitting time on Monday. The Mt Hood corridor-clearing contract was ahead of schedule. Kevin was working on other plans for more work.

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The redeye into Ronald Reagan International landed at 8:52 Tuesday morning. Mary's flight attendant expertise had Lilly on a shuttle and walking around the National Mall before noon. The first thing Lilly did was to place both hands on the white-and-gray marble block at the base of the Washington Monument. Over her right shoulder was the reflecting pond with the Lincoln Monument in the background. Over her right shoulder was the US Capitol with Old Glory flying in the fall air. At her back was the White House. There was just too much to see in two days. Lilly pulled the marked-up map from her backpack and headed for the Smithsonian museums. The jet lag, combined with eight full hours of sightseeing, finally took its toll. Lilly made a call home from her hotel room; her second call to the car phone went directly to voicemail; she was too tired to leave a message.

A congressional aide knocked on Lilly's hotel door early Thursday morning, and they walked the four blocks over to the Hart Senate office building. Lilly was thankful she had decided to give her fifteen-minute presentation in her kaki guide shorts and fishing vest. The procedural process was exact and to the minute. All speakers had 10 minutes to present their side, followed by a 5-minute question-and-answer period. Two environmental lawyers spoke first, and both supported protecting the Spotted Owl. A longhaired college professor in Birkenstocks with a flip chart and some handouts testified that clear-cutting the forest was causing global warming. Then Willamette Logging Industries presented its

side, with charts showing how many jobs would be lost in the Pacific Northwest if the forest were permanently kept closed. The fact that Willamette Industries was already looking to move out of Oregon was brushed aside. Trees and birds were a higher priority than family livelihoods.

Lilly was up next! It was intimidating to be called up to the large black table with one lone microphone in the center. The senators were seated on a semicircular platform with a three-foot-high ornate wall of solid wood in front of them. They each had their own microphone, their own gold-embossed nameplates, and a crystal pitcher of filtered ice water. Behind each senator were the beaming aides, willing to do most anything if it meant someday that they might earn a front row seat.

Lilly approached the black table and reached into the front pocket of her Khaki shorts for her scribed testimony. The lined notebook papers were not there! She unbuttoned the rear flap pockets and felt for the folded pieces of three-hole notebook paper. She started checking all the different-sized pockets on her fishing vest. Lilly's long legs began to shake—she was feeling faint.

"Ms. Lilly Saxton, why don't you just tell us a little about yourself? Just speak your mind, like the night you did at my fundraiser." Senator Byron Sherpard leaned forward and spoke into his microphone. "Remember, when you said that I didn't know bullshit about the forest."

The reporters, photographers, and other speakers behind Lilly laughed; some even cheered. The congressional representatives up front, each perched in their high-backed, throne-like chairs, just sat there, stone-faced. A few momentary smiles flashed from the working staff behind the semicircle of élite lawmakers.

Lilly turned and smiled at the supporters behind her; she turned back and ad-libbed, "Okay, I'm a fishing guide in Oregon. I take my clients out on the Sandy, Clackamas, Zigzag, Deschutes, and Metolius rivers to fly fish. I have climbed Mount Hood many times; it is Oregon's highest peak. I also coordinate a support team for hikers on the Pacific Crest Trail. So, I guess you could call me an environmentalist because the outdoors is how I make a living."

Lilly stayed on subject and went on to explain how important it was not only to protect the Spotted Owl, but also to manage deer, elk, and steelhead properly. She concluded her dissertation with these words, "I'm also the daughter of a logger who was out of work for over two years. If the environment and large lumber companies don't work together, twenty years from now, we will have more people putting out forest fires than managing a renewable natural resource."

During the question-and-answer period, it was clear that the environmentalist side of Congress would not budge. The lumber

lobbyist had already spent millions in court costs; their next move was to up and leave. Some Southern states welcomed lumber companies after most of their cotton and tobacco companies moved overseas. Lilly got a few notes handed to her from three different political aides. Two congressional representatives wanted to book her fly-fishing guide service, and one senior senator asked whether she would like to go out to dinner.

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Three hours behind Washington, DC time and back on the West Coast, Condi was about to face off with a bunch of high-ranking officials herself. She had reluctantly agreed to meet at the Aflex Insurance main office in downtown Los Angeles. She would be the solo acting Trask Inc. representative and had the authority to sign off on the Schultz claim. A lone microphone was in front of her, ready to record her words. Similar to Lilly, Condi always spoke her mind. The same insurance representatives who attended the last meeting were present, along with the CEO, CFO, and two senior vice presidents of Aflex Insurance. Unlike the previous meeting, an Aflex attorney was present. There was a *click,* and then the corporate lawyer said, "Please state your full legal name for the record."

Condi leaned forward and spoke into the microphone, "Condoleezza Angelina Johnson."

"Wow, that is a mouthful of a name. I bet you run out of spaces when you fill out forms." The Aflex CEO said from the opposite side of the table; several laughs followed.

"Condoleezza stands for sweetness. Angelina is after my great-grandmother." Condi replied with a stern, stoic glare at the Aflex CEO. "If you like, you can call me Condi."

"Okay, Condi, or maybe I'll just call you Ms. Sweetness," replied the CEO with a forced smile. This time, there was no laughter; everyone could feel the temperature rising. "The reason we asked you to come into our head office today is that, from what we have learned, you are the main person at Trask Trailers who keeps the records and files on most insurance claims. Is that correct?"

"Yes, that's correct."

"Well then, Condoleezza Angelina Johnson, is there any place in your job description that states that you are to be looking back at insurance claims that have already been closed?"

"Well, sir, I don't have an answer for that." Condi took a deep breath. "What I can tell you is that I have been compiling your claims going back at least twenty-five years, and I found no pattern that Aflex Insurance discriminates against race, religion, or gender."

"We are proud of our record, here at Aflex!" The CEO interrupted Condi and breathed a sigh of relief. He turned and winked at the other partners.

"Sir, your discrimination record is unambiguous. I found that Aflex doesn't care who they screw over!" Condi took a deep breath, then pushed a stapled-together spreadsheet to each person at the table. "You can see from my statistical analysis that Aflex, on average, pays out three times as much in legal fees as they do for claims."

Now, dead silence settled over the expansive deal-making conference room. The paper bomb that Condi had just dished out puckered assholes and exposed criminal actions. Condi closed her briefcase, stood tall, and walked away. The heavy doors closed hard when she exited. The arrogant, pompous conference room immediately exploded into finger-pointing, denials, and fear.

Behind those closed doors was one of those events that some would call 'Karma', others would say, 'Payback is hell'. For a moment, an insurance meeting where the affluent and influential dealmakers would have their feet held to the fire. Four of the six Aflex executives were forced to resign immediately. If Condi's spreadsheet made it to the press, five years behind bars for corruption would be a light sentence. Highlighted in yellow were two different insurance victims who had lost in court after years of legal battles with Aflex—both eventually committed suicide.

Worse than a meeting where your feet are held to a fire for corruption would be a meeting with Mr. Hung Meng for disobedience. Myung Chan was late for the meeting with Hung Meng. Meeting at a restaurant in Chinatown seemed odd; a meeting to make a video late at night seemed even stranger. Myung Chan froze when two men with black cloth bags over their heads came out through the swinging kitchen stainless steel doors. A third man snuck up from behind and put a stun gun against Myung's neck; he dropped to the floor. A garrote was wrapped around Myung's left wrist and then used to pull him into the kitchen. The red record button on a mini-video camera was pressed.

Myung was physically strong from all the sports that he played, but the three Saudi Arabian men overpowered him. He kept yanking his hand back and off the two-foot-thick kitchen chopping block. They hit him again with eighty thousand volts from the stun gun, and he blacked out. The heavy executioner's blade had no curve; it was designed that way, to make one clean cut. It sounded just like an axe chopping off a tree limb just before the maple chopping block stopped the blade. A garrote that is designed to cut off air in a windpipe—now it was like a tourniquet on an arm. It did

a good job; less than a pint of blood flowed from Myung's wrist onto the wood chopping block.

The fingers on Myung's severed left hand twitched violently. Myung awoke! He screamed and fought so hard they had to jolt him with the stun gun for the third time. A garrote went around Myung's neck for total submission. It was like controlling a small child; every time Myung gained consciousness, they tightened the Garrote, and he would pass out. The gas-fired kitchen grill was used to cauterize the wrist. The record button on the 8mm camcorder was pushed again; the red record light went off. The gore video would get the message across to Tim. It was worthy of being entered into the Sundance Film Festival's Teenagers category.

It was unlike Tina to be anywhere at eight in the morning. She was going to confront Tim about the $8,000 in commissions he owed her. The glass door to the Baylor anti-virus and on-site maintenance office was unlocked. Immediately, she noticed a heavy, pungent smell of raw meat. Next, she saw a camcorder sitting on the front reception desk on top of a blood-soaked towel. There was a note that read, "Never use the letters and number Y2K when selling antivirus protection services."

"Tina, this must be a first. You're here before me." Tim sarcastically bellowed as the glass door closed behind him.

Tina turned around and asked, "Do you know what this is all about?"

Tim walked over next to Tina. "No, but why is an 8mm videotape sitting on a dirty rag?"

"I think that is blood on the rag!" Tina pointed.

Tim snatched the videotape and note from the table and went into the computer lab, Tina. "I wonder what this is about? I never use the Y2K acronym when selling virus protection service."

"Like, I thought you said to scare customers. You told me to tell customers that something big is going to happen at the turn of the century!"

Tim wadded up the paper. "I forgot to tell you. Mr. Hung Meng said never to mention Y2K. Just say it, antivirus software for the twenty-first century."

"Tim, you never told me that…" Tina swallowed, then raised her voice. "Why haven't you paid me my eight-thousand-dollar commission yet?"

"Don't be such a bitch! I'm still building my business. I'll give you a couple of hundred dollars, but you'll have to earn it." Tim walked to a locking metal cabinet where he kept his private sex tapes and a bank deposit bag. "Tina, did you break into this cabinet?"

"No! Like, how would I do that?" Tina angrily answered; she knew what Tim meant about earning money. "The front door was unlocked when I got here."

There was the sound of someone opening the glass door and then bouncing off the hallway walls. Myung Chan's silhouette appeared in the lab doorway. There was bloody gauze wrapped around his charred wrist. "Mr. Hung Meng wants to make sure you watch the tape I left." Myung staggered out of the building—the fentanyl was wearing off.

Tim's hand was shaking as he inserted the videotape into a VCR hooked up to one of the computer monitors. Tina quickly went behind Tim's back and took the bank deposit bag from the metal cabinet and slipped it under the waistband of her skirt.

Tim hit PLAY! The tape started with the snapping sound of a stun gun. Then Myung Chan was being pulled and pushed into a restaurant kitchen by two hooded men. His left arm was being held down on a commercial-sized chopping block. There was the snapping of the stun gun again and the blur from a meat cleaver. The thud sound did it for Tina; she gagged—a protein drink was reversing in her stomach.

Tim continued as the camera zoomed in on the severed hand. The fingers moved, and the hand flipped over like a turtle on its back. Tina ran outside, and the cash bag slipped from under her skirt onto the ground. She bent over to pick it up and puked.

Unable to look away, Tim watched as a garrote around Myung's neck was tightened just enough to cause Myung to submit. Same as what Tim did when he choked out his prey. A syringe of painkiller was pumped into the severed wrist, then the garrote was used as a tourniquet.

The reception desk phone rang. The fourth ring snapped Tim back to reality. "Did you watch the video?" Mr. Hung Meng asked with a firm tone over the phone.

"I did," Tim answered in an equally firm voice.

"Are you going to follow my instructions and not say Y2K ever again?"

"Yes, sir. I will never mention Y2K again."

"What about that whore you hired? She still has my diamond necklace?"

CLICK…

Chap 28——————Did not Do

Daybreak on Monday morning, Patty and Condi were the only ones running the Trask corporate offices. Kevin slept in; he was exhausted and sore after two weeks of logging. Robert Trask called and extended their Mexico vacation by three days. Patty spent about fifteen minutes talking about her Hawaiian honeymoon with Condi, and then they got down to business. Aflex Insurance called and requested an immediate follow-up meeting; they were relieved that neither Kevin nor Robert Trask would be in attendance. Patty agreed to sit in and take notes for Condi. They were a team—no insurance executives could bully both of them.

Sometime after lunch, Kevin took the stairs two at a time. From the top landing, he looked to the left. It was odd not to see Patty at her desk. Kevin went down a floor; Condi wasn't at her desk either. The conference room doors were closed, and Kevin listened before he opened them. Four men and two women representing Aflex Insurance were on the far side of the table. Condi and Patty were sitting on the other side of the table; they were outnumbered two to six.

"Kevin, please come on in and have a seat." Condi motioned with her arm for Kevin to take the place at the head of the table.

Instead, Kevin sat next to Patty and whispered, "How was the honeymoon?"

Patty looked over at Kevin and mouthed the word, "Wonderful."

It didn't take Kevin long to realize that Condi was in complete control of the meeting. He excused himself after twenty minutes. Condi was drilling the Aflex executives hard, and Patty took notes and asked her own questions to clarify and verify their answers.

The Aflex representatives agreed to start paying the Schultz family a monthly annuity sixty days after they got notarized

signatures. Condi put the Aflex agents on notice about previous Physical therapy sessions that had been denied. Aflex was in a receptive negotiating mood—due to Condi's fact-checking into their history of claim denials. The meeting adjourned without much to do or major issues.

Kevin heard Patty's high heels coming up the stairs. He met her at the top landing. "Did Tina call this morning, before I came in?"

"I don't know? Let me go check your voicemail." Patty set her notepad on her desk, picked up the desk phone, and started going through messages.

Kevin stood over her and watched as she jotted down numbers and names. "Not a thing from Tina? Is something wrong?" Patty asked.

"Probably nothing… I stopped by her new apartment yesterday on my way down from Oregon, but she wasn't home. This morning, I couldn't reach her at her new job in San Jose."

"Did you try her parents in San Diego?" Patty asked.

"Yes, but they were evasive," Kevin replied and then wandered into the crow's nest.

It was quitting time, and Patty stood at her usual position in the doorway. "Is there anything you need before I head home?"

"Yes, just one thing," Kevin replied while he pushed papers into a folder. "Could you get in touch with Officer Bull Elk and tell him that I'm good with the Helicopter logging contract?"

"CP has been telling me all about that logging proposal." Patty walked to the desk and took the folder from Kevin. "Have CP get with his Desert Storm Pilot and Bull Elk." Kevin stood up from the office chair. "Trask Inc. will float the insurance bond."

"I'll get on it first thing in the morning," Patty replied and headed back toward the office door. She stopped and turned. "Speaking of insurance, it looks like Condi is going to close the Schultz family claim. Ann Marie and her family are going to get almost twice what they had hoped and prayed for."

"That sounds good," Kevin replied, along with a smile of approval. "It looked like Condi, and you really had Aflex insurance on the ropes in that meeting."

"We are also negotiating for the dental plan to include part-time workers. It's one of the demands in the pending union contract. We thought we would shoot it out and see how Aflex responded."

"If we could offer dental coverage to all our employees, that would go a long way toward getting the union contract settled." Kevin picked up the phone on his desk.

"Kevin, if we do get the additional dental insurance, do you want to offer it to the contract workers up in Oregon? CP thinks he cracked a tooth."

"You can look into that," Kevin replied and started dialing.

Patty put the folder on her desk and then returned to the doorway. "Still can't reach Tina?"

"Yeah, something's wrong! I'm not coming in tomorrow. I'm going to drive up to San Jose and look for that computer virus company she's working for. Call my car phone if you find out anything about dental insurance." Kevin slapped the handset onto the phone cradle.

"Do you know the name of the new business? I can go call directory assistance and maybe get an address for you."

Kevin rubbed his head, thought for a while, and then blurted out. "Y2K virus protection! I think that is what Tina told me."

Patty returned to her desk and called directory assistance. There were over 200 new businesses in San Jose since the dot-com boom. The operator added a new listing: Tim Baylor Anti-Virus and on-site maintenance. She returned to Kevin's office, leaving Tim's name off. "Here's the address."

Kevin glanced at the address. "Thanks. I don't know why I thought it was Y2K virus something?"

"Isn't that what Gus has on his inspection mirror, Y2K?" Patty asked.

"I don't remember," Kevin replied while putting the Post-it in his wallet. "I'll go ask him."

From the guest house above the garage. Kevin dialed the on-site anti-virus maintenance service. He was thankful to hear Tina's voice on the after-hours recording. Kevin remembered the last recorded message he had listened to from Benny at the Lake Shasta houseboat rental business, which stated the hours of operation. Kevin headed for the den in the mansion to find a map or atlas. Getting around downtown San Jose with the new GPS could be problematic, since it keeps saying "turn here" after you've already gone through the intersection.

There was an extensive map and an atlas section of North America and Europe. Robert Trask's retirement dream was to motorhome from Alaska, crisscrossing Canada from the west coast to the east coast, then east to west in the United States, and then zigzag south through Mexico, ending at the Panama Canal. Then catch a freighter to the United Kingdom if the motorhome is still in good shape.

"Could I help you find something?" Marie asked from the doorway.

Kevin turned and looked back over his shoulder. "I'm looking for a map of San Jose."

Marie walked into the den, ran her fingers down a stack of atlases, and pulled out one of the San Francisco area atlases. "Here

you go. Make sure to put it back into the exact spot, or Mr. Robert Trask could have a panic attack."

Kevin smiled at Marie and took the map book. "You know my dad pretty well."

"See… Your papa is a lot like my papa. They have a place for everything, and they plan everything in years. It took Papa eleven years to naturalize in the U.S. after getting a green card."

"No kidding, thirty-plus years to break fifty million in trailer sales. Vacations were like work, always planned hour by hour," Kevin replied. "We golfed in the morning, almost always the first group to tee off. Then we had to be somewhere else at a specific time. Dinner was always at six, no matter what; there was never a moment to relax or hang out."

"It's still the same Kevin. When Robert and Linda are home, it is breakfast at six in the morning and dinner at six in the evening." Marie said and then walked out of the den.

Kevin followed and said, "My parents are boring and way too organized."

Marie stopped and turned. "Maybe, but they make my job easy. I always know when to have their meals ready, and I never have to pick up after them, as I do for you."

"That's not true," Kevin replied with a scowl. "I'm very organized."

"Are you telling me that big pile of sawdust-covered, diesel-smelling clothes and those muddy spike boots that I cleaned and picked up in your room are you being organized?" Marie chided.

"I was in a hurry to get to work," Kevin replied. "I needed to be on time."

"Right! I noticed you left for work at noon." Marie said and turned back.

"Just leave the atlas on the nightstand, in the closet, or under your bed. I'll find it and put it back so as not to upset Mr. Trask."

"Thanks, Marie," Kevin headed back to the guest house.

The following morning, Kevin fiddled with the GPS and tried to set a waypoint for Tina's apartment. He was glad he had kept the road atlas as a backup. The blue display read 5hrs 35min, the ETA without traffic. Kevin wasn't even fifty miles north of Pasadena when Patty called to set up a meeting for Friday with Mr. Meng, Robert Trask, and the new attorney for Trask INC.

Patty called again to say that Aflex insurance was adding dental coverage, including orthodontia, for all employees and contract workers. Encouraging news that would ratify the union contract and help get Trask Inc. sold. Kevin ascertained an environmental Logging operation. Not so much to offset his capital gains tax, but to protect the environment and help Native Americans.

More good news. The Shultz family was pleased with the insurance offer and wanted one more contingency before they signed. That Kevin would be the Godfather to their new baby boy.

To commit to being a Godfather wasn't possible, let alone practical. Patty half-heartedly agreed to help get Kevin off the hook for the pending baptism in Michigan.

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The evening rush-hour traffic in San Jose seemed heavier than even in LA, most likely due to all the new upstart companies in Silicon Valley. It was getting too late to surprise Tina at work. Kevin eventually made it to her apartment and took note that the door looked as though it had been tampered with or kicked in. He scanned the parking lot for her silver Honda. *I'll wait here until seven thirty. That'll be more than enough time for her to get home, even in heavy traffic.* Tina was a no-show…

Before eight, Kevin examined the atlas and found the San Jose police station. The desk clerk furnished Kevin with little information. Filing a missing person report would require Tina's mother or biological father to fill out forms, plus a thirty-six-hour waiting period.

I know nothing about Tina's birth father… Tina has never mentioned his name. Tom is her stepfather and is creepy. Giving her breast implants for a high school graduation gift is weird. Tom was always bragging about the implants and wanted his friends to see them. Hell, Tom could be a suspect. I never trusted that creep. Maybe Bull Elk can get me some information about Tina's biological father? I'll call Bull in the morning if she doesn't show up. I need to get a motel room for the night.

The next morning, Tim was stunned to see Kevin come through the front door of his anti-virus company. "Hey, old buddy, what's up?" Tim jumped up from the reception desk, walked across the small lobby area, and then raised his hand to high-five Kevin.

"I'm not your buddy!" Kevin wasn't in the high-five mood. "Where's Tina?"

"I'd like to know that myself," Tim answered. "The stupid bitch stole twenty-two thousand dollars from me. I can't find her either!"

"What?" Kevin glanced down the darkened hallway. "What's back there?"

"It's our computer lab. We scan hard drives, install virus protection software, and monitor the dark side of the internet."

"Is she back there?" Kevin bolted down the hallway and pushed a blackout curtain to the left. There were computer workstations, a bench, and a heavy metal cabinet in the corner. "Tina worked back here?"

"No, Tina was my outside salesperson. With her looks and that body, she could sell ice to an Eskimo." Tim brushed by Kevin into the lab.

"You're a jerk and a misogynist," Kevin said while scanning the computer screens.

Tim pointed at the reinforced metal cabinet, where the top drawer was half open. "Friday, while I was watching a video, she snuck behind my back and stole my bank deposit bag."

"How do you know Tina stole the deposit bag?"

"A bank teller identified the bitch. He wasn't going to cash the business checks, but Tina worked her charm on the guy. Now I'm out twenty some grand!" Tim pushed the sliding drawer so hard that a stack of 8mm tapes on top tipped over. Two fell behind the four-drawer locking security-and-fire vault.

Kevin left the lab and rushed out the glass door. Tina needed to be rescued! Now he felt more like a knight in shining armor than a second-string boyfriend. He would rescue her before finalizing their love.

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The Y2K mission was front and center for Tim, who had a year and two months to get his part of the CCP mission in place. He wasn't privy to the fact that the detonation of three nuclear suitcase bombs had to coincide with the updating of the internal BIOS clocks in mainframe computers at the turn of the twenty-first century. There was only a six-second window after midnight on 12-31-1999 when the Y2K virus had to be released to suppress the free and uncensored World Wide Web. North Korea and Communist China already suppressed or blocked free speech and controlled their human elements by propaganda, and a zero tolerance for the Christian belief system. Tina was expendable, but American all-star basketball players in China were worshipped like gods.

Kevin went back to Tina's apartment complex and, for $200, the apartment manager unlocked the door. The one-room studio apartment had been ransacked. Kevin found an address book and slipped it into his pocket. *If Tina did steal a bank bag of money, she's probably hiding out with one of her girlfriends. The police won't take a missing person report for three days. I got a meeting on Friday, so I'll head back to LA…*

Nancy was evasive but hinted that Tina was safe and keeping a low profile. I might drive down to their home and surveil it over the weekend

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Before entering the conference room, Kevin carefully pulled the cellophane wrap off the new tennis racket and grabbed it by the head. He planned to extend the new racket over the conference table to Myung Chan, and then bingo—Myung's handprint would be on the new grip. Officer Bull Elk had already made arrangements to send the racket to a forensic lab in Denver. That strategy went sideways the moment Kevin walked through the double doors. Myung Chan wasn't present. In his place was a Middle Eastern man whom Mr. Hung Meng introduced as a new business partner.

Kevin didn't hear but three words at the opening of the land-sale meeting. Condi darkened the room and gave a PowerPoint presentation. Robert Trask was all in on everything that she presented. Copies of the contract got passed around. The possibility that Myung's scarred handprint matched the one on the fiberglass resin can was now an impossibility. That hand had been boiled to pulp on a commercial gas stove in Chinatown.

After the two-hour meeting in a dumbfounded state, Kevin wandered into Robert's office. "It looks like Condi, and you might be getting the land sale all wrapped up."

"It looks that way," Robert Trask said from behind his desk. "Truthfully, if it weren't for you getting the Union Contract ratified, we wouldn't be this far along."

"That was more of Patty's doing; she understood how important dental coverage was for the workers." Kevin sat in one of the chairs in front of the elaborate President's desk.

"It looks like the last item to do is to get Gus to move off-site." Robert winked.

"I've been working on him," Kevin replied. "He'll be taking stats at our city league basketball game this Sunday. We go out to dinner afterward. I'll let him know he's going to have to move."

"Good luck," Robert Trask replied and looked down at the papers Condi had passed out during the meeting. "Kevin, are you okay? You seem disconnected this morning."

"Ah… Yeah, I'm okay. Something is going on with Tina. I'm driving down to San Diego tomorrow to talk to her mom and stepfather."

"She is a gorgeous young lady. Are you making plans to get married?"

"No plans to get married at the moment. Tina got a big bonus at work and took off for a private vacation," Kevin lied, not wanting to say that Tina stole twenty-two thousand dollars and went into hiding.

"You might want to consider a prenup. When this deal is done, your mom and I are setting aside fifteen million and a personal account for you immediately. To buy a house, travel, or whatever you desire." Robert warned with a subdued tone.

"At least I'll be able to move out of the guest house." Kevin stood and headed for the door.

"Son, one last thing." Robert's tone turned serious. "I'm sorry that I backhanded you that day at the club."

Kevin turned and replied. "No big deal. You had a lot on your mind. I didn't realize how close we were to losing Trask Inc. I'm glad that I started looking over the business and got to see the big picture. It's a lot different from what I learned in college."

"At least your cavalier Robin Hood attitude helped get our employees behind you."

"Rob from the rich and give to the poor is what most professors preach. Keneth Saxton says If anyone is not willing to work, neither should he eat."

"Is that the guy you learned how to log from?"

"Sort of… Who knows, maybe I'll start an environmentally friendly logging company."

"Kevin, you sound like your grandfather. He fired anyone who dumped garbage in the water rings next to Gus' apartment. He said never to call it a cesspool."

"Is that why he built the top over it?"

"No, I did for safety's sake." Robert Trask said in a firm voice and then came around from his desk.

Kevin slightly pulled away when Robert squeezed Kevin's shoulder. "Your grandpa must be very proud of you, and so am I."

Kevin had never heard or ever felt that type of sincerity from his father. "Thanks, Dad, that means a lot to me."

Not hearing the stairs being taken two at a time caught Patty off guard. When Kevin appeared at the top landing, she asked. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I just had a good talk with the boss; he is pleased with how the land sale contract is coming along."

"At least Trask Inc. won't be closing the doors," Patty said as she stood and picked up a stack of papers. "I hope that you're going to be pleased with how the helicopter logging contract is coming along."

Kevin drew a deep breath; he knew that Patty would have a bunch of papers to sign and go over. "Okay, let's do it," Kevin said, and they headed for his office.

They worked right through lunch. Patty explained why the insurance bond was so expensive; using a helicopter to log with was dangerous. She went on to say that CP's war buddy went by the name 'Shrimp', that he was a red-headed, no more than one-hundred-and-forty-pound video game addict who could land a helicopter on a dime. Patty assured Kevin that CP considered Shrimp the most skilled pilot during Desert Storm. Shrimp flew behind enemy lines to medivac women and children out of Kuwait.

Kevin signed and pushed the documents back toward Patty; his mind was focused on Tina—hopefully she'd call soon.

Kevin headed for San Diego just before the Friday night rush-hour traffic turned into stop-and-go. When he arrived at Tina's parents' home, his gut told him that Tina would be hiding out there, or someplace close by. "What do you want?" Tom asked from behind a locked screen door.

"I drove down here to talk to Tina."

"We told you that we don't know where Tina is!"

Nancy approached with a cocktail glass in hand. "Hello, Kevin."

"Hello Nancy," Kevin turned his attention away from Tom. "Nancy, I'm just interested in your daughter's safety. Last Sunday, she wasn't at her apartment, and then on Tuesday and Wednesday, she wasn't at work up in San Jose."

"I know. Tina and Tim fought; she needed to get away for a while." Nancy pushed Tom aside and opened the screen door. "Come on in." Nancy took Kevin by the arm and downed her cocktail. "You and I need to talk privately."

It didn't take much time before Nancy was swooning over Kevin. She always had strong feelings toward Kevin, not just because of his Trask wealth, but also because of his drop-dead good looks. She was privy to the fact that Kevin was a virgin—she was willing to help him explore and find true sexuality. Cosmopolitan magazine and an open marriage made her an expert in self-gratification and pleasure.

After about thirty uncomfortable, weird minutes on the backyard patio, Kevin slithered back through the house and out the front door. No way was he going to take Nancy up on the hot tub invitation as she slowly undressed down to her black bra and panties and got in. Kevin did get Tina's birth father's full name, information that could help locate her. Nancy did mention Susan, whom she referred to as Tim's pregnant slut girlfriend, who was now living in Ohio at her parents' home.

Kevin called Bull with the additional information before he pulled away from the curb. Bull said that he would do some more checking and that Interpol was sending him information about Mr. Hung Meng. Kevin headed back home—content that Tina was hiding from Tim and out of harm's way.

Saturday morning, Marie knocked on the guesthouse door. There was no reply, no sound from inside. She knocked again, then used her maid's passkey to open the door. Kevin was lying face down on the bed in boxer shorts. He was lean and muscular; his V back was more like an Olympic swimmer's than a basketball player's. Marie flashed back to their skinny-dipping episode when they were teenagers. Kevin had grown up while she had grown out. She relived those innocent summer days of adolescence out by the

pool. Marie tiptoed across the room, shielded by the bathroom's half-wide wall. She looked at herself in the mirror and thought that it might not be the right thing to do—but she loved Kevin.

I have to do this. We never have fun these days. Kevin's been so tense for too many years. All through college, and now working for his dad. I have to do this, just like we were kids again… Marie slowly filled up a glass with cold water and tiptoed back out into the room. Kevin hadn't moved; she dumped cold water onto Kevin's bareback.

Kevin sprang up on all four. Marie was halfway down the stairs before he made it out the door. "I will get you for that!" Kevin yelled from the top of the stairs.

Marie stopped at the bottom and turned around. "Your father wants to talk to you out by the… ah… ah…" Marie had to point toward the pool because she was laughing so hard.

Kevin saw Robert, doing his usual morning ritual, reading the newspaper and drinking coffee, and thought. *I might as well get this over with*.

Maria headed back up the stairs, and Kevin was headed down, pulling on a white alpaca robe with the Trask name embossed in gold. "I'll change your bed and pick up. It looks like a tornado touched down in there."

"Don't put everything away. I might have to pack for Florida." Kevin replied and rubbed Marie's head, messing up her long black hair.

"How about I wash all the dirty clothes, then fold them up and leave them on the bed?"

"That would be great," Kevin replied, continued down the stairs, and then headed toward the pool.

"What were you and Marie doing up in the guest house?" Robert Trask asked from behind the newspaper.

"Oh, she booted me out so that she can clean up in there," Kevin answered.

"Good luck to Marie on that chore. You have never been good at picking up after yourself." Robert dropped the newspaper next to his chair. "After our land sale meeting, I went over the production numbers, and they look good. With the pending lawsuit hopefully not going to court and the union contract being settled, Linda and I will be taking a vacation before everything gets finalized."

"What!" Kevin was shocked. He wanted to be done at Trask Inc.

"You know your mom had that bout with cancer a few years back," Robert said and took a drink of orange juice. "That's why we were in Mexico last month."

"Mom's cancer is back?" Kevin asked, scared.

Linda had just come out of one of the back doors of the mansion and jogged across the manicured green lawn toward them. As she approached, Kevin opened his arms, and they embraced. "I love you, Mom," Kevin whispered in her ear.

This was the first time, in so many years, that the three of them had a heart-to-heart family meeting. Kevin felt relieved that the immunotherapy treatments in Mexico were about being vigilant. Linda was always proactive and believed in holistic medicine; she would do Chemo again if needed, but her numbers were nowhere close to needing that radical of treatment. The family meeting lasted over two hours, and Kevin understood he would have to step up. Grandpa Trask's memory flashed in Kevin's head. *You will be judged by the good work you do and by the work you did not do.*

Chap 29 ————Hook-up or Basketball

It was hard to tell who was appreciated more on the Sparks city league basketball team. Kevin was probably the most skilled player, which created resentment among at least half of the team. Gus's statistical tracking and player efficiency rating system helped the team the most. The facts didn't lie—players that hogged the ball the most were the ones least likely to pass the ball during critical point-making opportunities. Gus was the main reason that the Sparks were on a winning streak and headed for the playoffs.

After the game, while at dinner, Gus hardly ever talked about basketball. He always wanted to talk Superhero stuff, and this Sunday night was no different. Gus ordered Root beer instead of an Orange Soda. A promising sign, Kevin thought. Maybe this was an indication that Gus would be up to a change of address. Kevin was sweetening the deal for Gus by talking about the Trask corporate tickets in the third row for half of the LA Lakers home games. Most often, the tickets were given to different business partners, but Kevin usually made one or two games each season. Now that college was out of the way, Kevin planned to attend more games. Gus took in every word…

Kevin waited until they finished dinner before he made the request. "Gus, I know how hard changing your routine is, but within six months, you are going to have to move from the Trask manufacturing apartment."

"I know that Mr. Kevin Trask. Now that you have the finalized Y2K counter plan. I will." Gus paused. "I will be able to move." Gus's face turned more stoic.

Kevin was presently surprised. "And Gus, you don't have to worry about a thing. I will take care of everything. We will even hire a professional moving company."

"Oh, no need to hire a company, Mr. Kevin Trask. I wrote down where all my stuff should go. Those instructions are in the back of the red binder." Gus said in a monotone yet precise tone.

The red binder. Kevin's thoughts were halted. Gus gave me a red binder the weekend that Nick Icorn had camped out in the parking lot. I think I put that binder in the trunk of the SL600? Maybe I looked at the binder at home. I don't recall seeing it anywhere. Maybe Patty moved it?

"Mr. Kevin Trask, are you okay?" Gus asked.

"Ah… Yeah, Gus, I'm okay. I have a lot on my mind at work and finding Tina."

"Is Ms. Tina Williams missing?" Gus asked. "She thinks that I'm a retard, but I can help you look for her. I'm good at finding and organizing."

"Gus, I think she might be in hiding. But thanks for the offer." Kevin replied.

"Did they put one of those spy tags in her car?" Gus asked. "You could track her with it."

"A… I don't think so?" Kevin replied in a guarded tone. He wanted to be careful not to get Gus off on superhero stories. Talking into a wrist phone, x-ray vision, or drilling tunnels with a Repulsar Drill was real stuff in Gus's mind. "Gus, I need to get you back to the plant and then get home to pack."

"Okay," Gus replied and then slid out of the booth and headed directly for the exit.

Their conversation all the way back to the parking lot gate was muted. Kevin could tell something was really weighing on Gus. It was probably the thought of moving that kept him silent.

"Gus, jump out and lift the gate. I will drive you to the apartment."

"Okay, Mr. Kevin Trask. I have something for you on your trip to go find Ms. Tina Williams." Gus got out, went into the guard shack, and opened the gate. They drove to the apartment. "Wait here." Gus disappeared into the apartment.

Kevin glanced out back at the piles of raw steel and rows of new trailers ready to be shipped. It felt as if Grandpa Trask was looking down with disappointment. The feeling of despair increased when Gus returned to the driver's window and held out his hand. "Take this! Mary, the mother of Jesus, knows what it is like to look for a lost child."

Kevin held his hand out the window, and Gus placed the rosary on it. "Thanks." Kevin took the rosary and hung it over the rearview mirror.

"You should also pray with St. Anthony. He helps find children and lost things."

Could St. Anthony help find your red binder? Kevin thought as he drove away.

Late Sunday night, traffic was nonexistent on the drive through Pasadena. The lighting in the six-car garage was poor. Kevin got a flashlight off a workbench and searched the trunk of the Sl600. All he found was a clean oil can, with a red mechanic's rag, and some cash stuffed inside. He meandered up the stairs with a flashlight in one hand and the rosary in the other. Two piles of clean clothes were on the bed with a note. The note read: You have clean underwear in case you get picked up by ambulance. A smiley face followed. My dad cleaned up and sealed your spike boots. Your forever swimming friend, Marie.

Kevin dropped to his knees and smelled sealing wax on the corks. He pushed the cork boots to the side and then shone the flashlight under the bed. Next, he started throwing stuff out of the closet and then attacked the desk drawers—no red binder. The nightstands were in sight now. Just as he approached, the phone rang!

"Hello," Kevin yelped into the handset.

"Kevin, my mom told me you came to their house looking for me."

Kevin sat down on the bed. "Where have you been? Where are you at? I've been looking for you all week!"

"Like I had to get away from work stuff for a while."

"Did you really steal twenty-two thousand dollars from Tim?" Kevin asked, with a half-snicker. He was glad that someone was finally sticking it to Tim.

"Twenty-two thousand dollars, no way. There was less than four thousand dollars in that deposit bag. The uncashed checks are in my bedroom."

"I'll pay back the money, pick up the checks, and send the stuff to Tim. I can fly you back home on the company jet," Kevin offered.

Knowing that not even a mob family could keep her safe, Tina changed the conversation. The news that Sue was no longer pregnant did the trick. The story was that Tim had taken Sue to Mexico and secretly drugged her for an abortion, which was horrible. Tina said she lay low for a few months before daring to come back to California.

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Monday was another late start for Kevin. Gus lifted the yellow security gate and hurried out of the guard shack. "Mr. Kevin, I thought you were leaving to go look for Tina?"

"Don't need to now. Tina called after I dropped you off last night." Kevin reached into his pocket. "You can have this back, since I now know where Tina is."

"No, I made the Glory-be bead rosary for you. I can't take it back. It is like the one Esmeralda in the Hunchback of Notre Dame sings about."

"I don't recall that part." Maybe you're talking about the new animated cartoon that Disney took a lot out of.

"No, Mr. Kevin Trask. I'm talking about the superhero, Quasimodo, who wanted to be turned to stone because he had no friends and…"

The word superhero set off Kevin's alarm. "I'm late, we'll talk later, Gus. I got some important things to wrap up." The SL600 tires chirped as Kevin sped away from the guard gate and another superhero fable.

Patty was used to Kevin's late starts on Monday and gave him about ten minutes to settle in and look over his weekly planner. "Here's your late morning coffee," she said from the doorway.

Kevin looked up. "We don't have any important meetings this week, do we?"

"Not so far. All the paperwork for the helicopter logging got sent off this morning, and Condi is finalizing the new dental insurance plan." Patty said while she set the coffee on the desk. "Probably best not to let the employees know about the dental coverage until it's a done deal."

"I hope that added benefit will increase our production numbers." Kevin picked up a spreadsheet. "I might take the rest of the week off. My parents need to go to Mexico in a couple of weeks. I should be here when Robert is away."

"Is there something wrong?" Patty asked.

"Mom is going to try some new experimental immunotherapy down there."

"Oh…" Patty braced herself on the front of the desk. "Your Mom has cancer?"

"She had cancer. This is a new type of proactive treatment." Kevin replied.

"Oh…" Patty sat in the chair in front of the desk. "My twin Sister died from cancer…"

For half an hour, Kevin caringly listened to Cecelia's battle with cancer. Patty shared how she had lost her faith in God and went through a self-destruction period after Cecelia died. Some tears flowed, and in that shared half hour, Kevin learned more about how unpredictable cancer can be. Patty knew all about immunotherapy, but it wasn't an option or a treatment that her parents could have afforded. Guilt, acceptance, and closure were things Patty went through; she was there for the Trask family if need be.

After lunch, Patty worked her magic but couldn't get Kevin a direct flight to Ohio before Friday. At the spur of the moment, Kevin decided to drive; a two-day road trip would be a good way to clear his head. Plus, Tina talked about cruising around with the top down in the SL600. The Ohio Valley during fall, with all the hardwood trees, was said to be warm and beautiful, a great place to get away and be with Tina.

Kevin hurried up the guest room stairs; all the clothes that he had kicked on the floor were back on the bed in neat, folded piles. These were mainly jeans and his logging clothes. He needed to dress sharply for his surprise visit and overnight stay with Tina. Marie halted the armful of clothes at the bottom of the stairs. She turned Kevin 180 degrees and marched him back up the stairs.

"Don't you know what a garment bag is for?" Marie scoffed at Kevin as she went to the closet and got the Louis Vuitton garment bag with hangers. She picked out a sports coat, two pairs of slacks, a long-sleeved shirt, and a cashmere sweater. Marie knew how much of a bitch Tina could be to Kevin if he weren't wearing the latest style. She refolded some athletic clothes and put them in the designer sports bag.

Inside the garage, Kevin placed the luggage in the trunk while Marie handed him a pair of Italian dress shoes. Kevin turned toward her. "Thanks for all the help. You always have my back."

"Even after I threw the cold water on you?"

"Well, I haven't forgotten about that yet." Kevin put his arms around Marie and hugged her for a long time. "You're the best swimming buddy I could have ever asked for."

Their Besties embrace ended. Marie looked up into Kevin's hazel eyes and said, "Godspeed."

The plan was to be in Las Vegas by midnight, get a good night's rest, and then drive straight through to Chicago. The speed limit in Nebraska was 75 MPH, and it dropped to 70 MPH in Kansas, according to the road atlas. After that, Kevin could cruise the vast open plains at 90MPH. Tina would be so surprised to see him, and happy to go cruising around the Ohio Valley countryside with her head held high and her hair blowing in the wind. Maybe the top will have to be up. Tina doesn't like it when her hair gets messed up.

Often, poorly laid out plans go awry. Kevin got pulled over twice, and Bull Elk had yet to call with the address of Sue's parents' home. The drive across Nebraska and Iowa was long, straight, and tedious. The mobile phone indicator had shown no signal for the past 10 hours, and almost all the radio stations played country music or discussed religion. Realistically, meeting and surprising Tina in eastern Ohio on Wednesday was not going to happen. Thursday was the new planned arrival date, assuming Bull Elk called with an address.

Thirty miles east of Chicago, Kevin got pulled over for the third time. This road trip to lose his virginity had turned into more of a headache than it was worth. The tall state police officer walked up and then around the concept car twice. "How fast will this import go?"

"I don't know a… Ms. Police Officer." Kevin cautiously answered as he handed over his driver's license and registration. "I thought I was driving the speed limit."

"What is the speed here in Illinois?" She asked

"Seventy miles an hour, Madam."

"Don't call me Madam. I'm no whore, call me Officer Pierce," The tall, ponytailed woman said as she took Kevin's driver's license and registration and went back to the patrol car.

Kevin checked the signal indicator on the mobile phone; there were three bars. He dialed the private line for Trask Inc. "Patty, I'm pulled to the side of the road just outside of Chicago. Do I have any messages?"

"You do! I have been calling you for almost two days. Those car phones are worthless!"

"No kidding, the GPS unit gives bad directions. There was zero coverage across Nebraska and Kansas."

"Anyway, Tina called yesterday and left a motel and room number."

"What? I didn't tell Tina I was going to pull a surprise visit on her." Kevin replied.

"I don't know anything about that Kevin," Patty snipped. "Are you ready for the phone number?"

"Ah… I'll have to call you back. Officer Pierce is coming back with a ticket!" Kevin tossed the mobile handset onto the passenger seat.

"I thought I recognized you," Officer Pierce said as she handed a yellow warning to Kevin. "You played point guard for the Duke Blue Devils. Coach Mike McCall respects your style of playing, even though he always referred to you as a rat."

"What?" Kevin looked up from the driver's seat and took the yellow piece of paper.

"I was on the Notre Dame Women's basketball team when he got fired from Gonzaga. Not sure what got between the two of you, but he mentioned you many times during practice."

"Coach McCall is coaching basketball at Notre Dame?"

"Yeah, the women's team. I played for him my senior year."

"Oh… I haven't heard that name for over four years."

"Mr. Trask, I'm just giving you a warning. You might want to check your insurance policy. The registration for this concept car lists a Chinese Import company as the lienholder. If you were in

an accident, they would receive the insurance payout. Something is not right with the title and registration."

"The car was a graduation gift," Kevin replied

"Whatever," Officer Pierce replied. "Slow down! The speed limit in Illinois is fifty-five miles per hour."

The patrol car pulled out onto Interstate 80, and Kevin called Patty back. "I'm ready for that phone number." Kevin wrote down the motel and room number. "One more thing, Patty. Could you check with DMV and see who the lien holder on my car is?"

"No problem, can you give me the car registration number?"

Kevin took the car registration back out of the glove box and read off the number. "No hurry, I just have a hunch that Mr. Meng is pulling a fast one on Trask Inc."

As Kevin dialed the number off the paper, he thought. This will probably work out better than showing up at Susan's parents' house. Especially if we go out to dinner and dancing, and then we won't need to get a room…

"Hampton Inn, Key West, Florida," came through the headset.

The word Florida caused Kevin's mind to go vacant. "Ah… I'm looking for Tina Williams. Is she staying there?"

"One moment, sir." There was a click when the receptionist put Kevin on hold. There was another click before the receptionist came back on the line. "I rang Ms. Williams. There is no answer. Would you like to leave a message?"

"No, I'll call back," Kevin was flustered and confused. "Which Hampton Inn am I calling?"

"You are calling the Hampton Inn at Key West, Florida, just north of the airport." There was a click on the mobile phone for the third time.

"Okay!" There was another click. Then Kevin threw the handset onto the passenger seat and slammed both hands on the steering wheel. What a total waste of time. Why is Tina in Florida? I'm such an idiot to take off without double-checking where Sue's parents live.

The bag phone rang. "Hello," Kevin yelled into the handset.

"I've been trying to reach you for two days. I see you got speeding tickets in Kansas and Nebraska. Where are you headed?"

"Oh, it's you, Officer Bull," Kevin replied. "I decided to do a road trip to clear up my mind and meet up with Tina in Ohio."

"If you knew that your girlfriend was in Ohio, I wish you had let me know. I spent a lot of time trying to track her down." There was a click in the handset.

"Sorry, Bull. I'm trying to figure out the mix-up as we talk." Kevin replied with guilt and stupidity, adding to a road trip gone bad.

"No worries," replied Bull

"Is there anything I can do to make up for your wasted time?"

"No, you have already done enough for me." Office Bull replied in a calming tone. "They got the helicopter logging operation already underway. I plan to head up to the Biddle Pass loading and landing site to check things out."

"That sounds great." Kevin was happy that something was working out. "My secretary Patty and CP put that whole helicopter operation together."

"They done good," Bull answered. "This is going to be a big plus for my people on the Rez. The Elders want to thank you with a tribal ceremony."

"I don't need any thanks. All I did was float the insurance bond." Kevin replied.

"So, I'll see you next week?" Bull asked.

"Not for a couple of weeks," Kevin answered. "CP is the helicopter, go-to-guy, so he wants to stay up there for a month to make sure the operation is safe."

"Oh…" Bull hesitated and then went on. "You also asked me to run a background check on a Kang Chan and a Mr. Hung Meng. Well, Kang Chan is back in North Korea per a passport stamp. But Interpol came back with some fascinating stuff on Mr. Hung Meng. I put a folder together on Mr. Meng. He runs an international import business, and he just enrolled seven men in a commercial jet flight program. When you come up to Oregon, I'll show you what I found."

"That sounds good, Bull. It might be a month or so before I'm back in Oregon."

"No problem, Mr. Trask. That will give me more time to double-check an underwater welding school that Hung Meng's import company wants to open in Long Beach. Godspeed on your road trip." Click, Bull Elk hung up. Click, Kevin hung up. *Click…*

Flight training? I know China is shipping tons of stuff to the United States, but is flying product even feasible? Underwater welding is essential for all the deep-sea oil rigs operating around the world. Kevin put the handset back into the canvas bag, started the SL 600, looked over his shoulder, and merged onto the interstate. I need to get some rest… This last-minute road trip to surprise Tina turned into a big cluster _____.

After Kevin checked into a Marriott Hotel near Chicago O'Hare airport, he called Tina's room at the Hampton Inn in Florida. No one answered! He tried again at 9:30 pm and had to leave a message. "I tried to call you three times. I'm in Chicago. Will you please call back as soon as you get this message?" Kevin hung up and crawled into bed.

It was 1:30 am when the motel room rang. "Like, why are you in Chicago?"

"A… Like, I wanted to see you?" Kevin fumbled around for the switch on the nightstand lamp. "Tina, I was driving to Ohio to surprise you."

"Yeah, that would be cool. But like, Sue and I decided to take a trip down here to Florida to work on our tans."

"You're out tanning at one thirty in the morning?" Kevin blurted while rubbing his eyes.

"Ah… Like, Sue was bored, so we went out to a dance club for a drink. You know how I'm helping Sue get through what happened to her in Mexico." Tina lied; she was the one who wanted to party with the stolen money.

"Tina, it's late… Can I call you in the morning?" Kevin groggily asked.

"Like, yeah, that would be super cool. Like, get a good night's sleep so that you can drive down here to Florida. Like, I'll see about renting the honeymoon suite here with Tim's money."

"I'll call you in the morning." Kevin hung up and plopped his head back into the pillow.

Tina hung up and passed out.

Kevin knew not to call Tina before nine. After coffee, a croissant, and orange juice in the motel breakfast nook, he called from the parking lot. Sue asked Kevin to call back later; Tina was still sleeping. Kevin fiddled around with the GPS, and it showed that Key West, Florida, was a twenty-three-hour drive. The GPS unit showed the drive from Pasadena to Chicago would take 30 hours, but it turned out to be more like a two-day drive.

This GPS unit is a piece of crap, with all the wrong turns it keeps spitting out. The way it calculates travel time is off by at least thirty percent. I need to be back in LA Sunday afternoon. If Kevin had had the headset to his ear, he would have heard a click when his current location was recorded and then transmitted. When he crossed the border into Indiana, Kevin pulled over at a rest stop and called the Key West motel in Florida back. Kevin thought the clicking was inherent in all mobile phones. Eavesdropping was possible on any device that transmitted analog radio waves. But to pin a location and transmit it to another phone was state-of-the-art technology that was still being developed.

"Like, Kevin, thanks for calling me back. Like, I really have a headache this morning." Tina wearily said.

"I won't make it down to Key West until late Friday night or Saturday morning, then I'll need to catch a plane to be back in LA by Sunday afternoon."

"Catch a plane! Like, why the rush to get back home?"

"Gus and I have a basketball game to go to," Kevin replied.

Tina took a big swig of Diet Coke, hoping to quench her dry mouth. She rubbed her aching forehead. "Can't you miss the basketball game and come lie around and relax with me?"

"I could miss the game, but it would really upset Gus," Kevin replied.

"Like, who is Gus?"

"Gus is the security guard at the plant," Kevin answered.

"Isn't he a retard or slow. You would rather spend time with him than me?"

A javelin of anger was about to launch from Kevin's throat. He noted the glory-be rosary swinging from the rear-view mirror. "Gus isn't slow! He gets fixated on time and order!"

"Like, he creeps me out. He used a mirror on a stick to check me out last time I came to see you at work."

"Tina, I'll call you. I need to call Patty and see if she can get a flight for me into LAX."

"Kevin, call back after noon? I need to go back to bed." Click, click, and then a final click.

Kevin used the restroom, and when he returned, a breeze blew on the crucifix at the end of the rosary. The swinging cross was hypnotic. I can't remember why Gus added five beads. I think he said something about Glory be to the Father.

Kevin waited until the rosary stopped swinging before dialing. "Trask trailers vice president's office."

"Patty, could you check on getting me a flight from Lansing, Michigan, back into LAX late Saturday evening or first thing Sunday morning?"

"I thought you were headed to Ohio to meet up with Tina."

"No change of plans, Kevin answered."

"Are you going to go to the Shultz family Baptism?" Patty asked in high spirits.

"I am if you can get me a flight back home in time to pick up Gus for our city league basketball game Sunday afternoon."

"I'm sure they would appreciate seeing you there," Patty said as tears ran down her face. "I'll call you back after I get some flight schedules."

Kevin was in South Bend, Indiana, when Patty called back. "Kevin, your father scheduled the Trask jet to be on the ground Sunday morning at the Capital Region International Airport. Robert wants to send flowers, so I'll send something appropriate."

"That's wonderful, Patty. Tell my dad thanks."

"We're all proud of you. Condi cried when I asked her for the Shults' address."

Kevin didn't have an answer for how to do what felt right. "I will gain two hours flying back, so making the game shouldn't be a problem."

"I already talked with Gus, and he is fine with me driving him to the Poinsette Rec Center."

"That's great. It will give me some time to loosen up. My butts been in a bucket seat for almost forty hours."

"Gus wants to know if you two will still get Fish and Chips and a root beer."

"Tell Gus for sure, and that he can also have an orange Nehi soda if he wants."

Kevin kept ignoring the calls from Florida. He did take one call from Officer Bull Elk and two from Patty. The east side of Lake Michigan was more rural, with more farms than Kevin expected. The hardwood trees were starting to change color, and there was a brisk tinge of fall in the air. Oddly, it felt refreshing to meander north toward Canada rather than south toward Florida. The signal indicator on the mobile phone showed no signal.

Eventually, in a small rural town called Muskegon, Kevin found a phone booth and called the Hampton Inn in Florida. Tina didn't answer. Kevin left a message, "Tina, I decided to head back to LA and go play basketball with Gus. Have fun in Florida."

Saturday Morning, Kevin showed up unannounced on the Shultzes' front porch. He didn't even need to ring the doorbell. Ann Marie opened the door about six inches until it banged against her walker. She pushed the walker out of the way and opened the door the rest of the way.

Kevin knelt and put out his hand. "How are you doing, young lady?"

"Daddy, he's here," Ann Marie yelled back into the house, then pulled Kevin into the front room. "I knew you would be here for my baby brother's Baptism."

Chap 30——————God chit-chat

The private flight into John Wayne Airport arrived ahead of schedule. This gave Gus time to see the inside of a Cessna Citation. After the pilot let Gus sit in the cockpit, he handed Patty some first-flight wings and asked her to pin them on Gus. Patty carefully pinned the brass wings emblem above Augustine's pocket.

Kevin jogged around the inside of the hangar, stopping after each lap to stretch. Five days of driving, followed by four hours of flying, could lead to a pulled hamstring or other injury.

Gus talked nonstop about how superheroes have their special emblems; Superman had the red-and-yellow "S" logo on the back of his cape; Batman had the Batmobile. Iron Man, the Repulsor Drill. Gus now had his own special wings.

Patty kept glancing in the rearview mirror while driving and talking. "Gus, what image or relic reminds you of superhero Jesus?"

There was a long silence as Gus slipped into deep thought. Kevin hadn't been paying attention because he was focused on the city league basketball game.

Finally, Gus spoke, "Ms. Patty, Jesus' special icon image, is the cross."

"That's right, or sometimes called the crucifix."

"Ms. Patty, these wings remind me of the Holy Ghost Wings on my baptism certificate. Same as on the Ecce Agnus painting at church."

"I'd like to see that painting," Patty replied.

Kevin was unexpectedly stunned; his mind shifted off the game. He could not get his head around the words 'ghost wings'. Less than twenty-four hours ago, he had signed his name as a witness on a baptismal certificate featuring a gold-embossed emblem of wings in the center.

After the Sparks warmed up and the game started, Gus began charting player efficiency. By the third period, Gus had circled a player on the opponent's team who would probably hog the ball for the winning shot. Gus also informed the Sparks coach that Kevin should be pulled from the rest of the game. Gus was right on target; the game would have ended going into overtime if the opponent's star player hadn't driven the entire court and then gone for an earth-shattering slam dunk. The ball bounced off the back of the rim. The bell rang, and the Sparks won with Kevin on the bench.

About halfway through dinner, Gus was back to being Gus. Kevin segued from their superhero conversation to the question of when he should move off-site. Kevin ensured that the townhouse would have a telephone.

Gus's reply was, "Who would call him?" The last person he talked to on a home phone was his dad, calling from his deathbed at Glendale Memorial Hospital, which was 4427 days ago. These exact details were in a yellow notepad that Gus had in his pocket.

The 4427 days were counted from the day after Gus moved into the corner makeshift apartment. Kevin remembered being in middle school when Grandpa Trask turned the old Navy bunk room into an apartment. Patty did a quick mental calculation and estimated Gus' father passed twelve years ago, give or take.

That Sunday night drive back to the Trask Inc. turned somber. Gus told how he had never been held by his mother—that she had died giving birth to him. A few years later, his dad was diagnosed with lung cancer and only lived another 43 days.

It was dark, and the tears dropping from Patty's face were not noticed. After his father's death, Gus was homeless, and that was when Grandpa Trask stepped into Gus's life.

Kevin only knew part of the story and was at a total loss for words. As Patty pulled up to the orange gate rail, Gus unclicked the rear seatbelt and said, "Jesus said Do not be afraid one hundred and eight times." He put his notepad into his pack, got out, ducked under the gate, and faded into the darkness.

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Tim Baylor had a pocket-sized notepad he called his little black book, which was also filled with numbers and details. The number 66 represented the drugged girls he had sexually assaulted. It should have been 67, but Lilly Saxton got lucky. Unlike Gus, Tim prided himself on being the most innovative and sharpest tool in the box. He was already drafting an exit plan from Hung Meng. Tim had always been the captain or leader of the pack; there wasn't room for a second partner.

Mr. Hung Meng didn't plan to be a partner! Soldiers who followed orders were his only requirement—punishment or death to the disobedient is how he ruled when expectations were not met. Myung Chan lost a limb for noncompliance.

The white ice box of Omaha steaks was a token of congratulations for the new antivirus business, Tim thought. The FEDEX driver set the cold box on the reception desk, got a signature from Tim, then hurried out the office door. Tim went to the computer lab to retrieve a box cutter. The white fog from dry ice rolled out when Tim lifted the Styrofoam lid. He pushed aside the foil paper—a left human hand was on ice! The phone on the reception desk rang and rang and rang… Finally, in a stunned state, Tim picked up the phone, but couldn't get any words out.

"Mr. Hung Meng wants you to look in the very bottom of the ice chest for a Ziploc freezer bag. Inside that bag, you will find some instructions that need to be completed before the celebration day of the great lie about Indians praying with the Pilgrims. Mr. Hung Meng also warns that if the Y2K letters and numbers ever come out of your mouth again, he has a smaller ice box for your tongue!"

With weak, wobbling legs, Tim moved the white ice box to the computer lab and used a screwdriver to push the handle aside. He snagged the Ziploc bag. The note inside read:

> OFFICER BULL ELK ON THE WARM SPRINGS INDIAN RESERVATION HAS A FOLDER ON HUNG MENG IMPORTS. THAT FOLDER AND OFFICER BULL ELK NEED TO GO AWAY, BEFORE THANKSGIVING DAY.

Tim found an empty box and started packing his sex tapes and other incriminating items into it. He rushed out without locking the storefront door. When he opened the trunk of his BMW, there was another note:

> YOUR COMPUTER SERVICES WILL STILL BE NEEDED TO INFECT COLLEGE AND BUSINESS MAINFRAME COMPUTERS. YOUR BROTHER IS A DEEP-SEA FISHERMAN. EACH YEAR, THERE ARE MANY ACCIDENTS AT SEA. FOLLOW ORDERS!

Tim looked back over his shoulder and surveyed the parking lot. It was time for the mall to open; many cars jockeyed for parking spots. The feeling of being watched was intense. Tim walked back, entered the store, and then slipped out the back door. He was too clever to be outfoxed. He stole a garden trimming hatchet from a landscaping trailer and kept his back to the cinder-

block roll of mall rear doors. Two blocks away, he got on a bus and didn't look back. Without a passport, Florida was as far from California as he could go. The other option was to take a stand and fight.

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Monday morning, Kevin had one thing to do before work. The Nokia Shop had a smaller bag phone than the one in the SL600, but it required a big battery pack. Kevin looked at the smaller handheld units. The salesman sized him up, knowing that if he oversold or lied about how poor the cell phone coverage was outside major cities, Kevin might walk away. The frank honesty about poor cell phone coverage outside major cities paid off. Kevin purchased four Nokia handheld models with a combined ten hours of monthly analog call time. The GPS and caller ID were features Kevin didn't care about, but they were included in the ten-hour family plan. Screening calls were rude, but Kevin liked not answering if he didn't want to. Solitude was the main reason he enjoyed solo mountain climbing.

"Is it lunch time already?" Patty kidded with Kevin when he rounded the landing at the top of the stairs with a green shopping bag in hand.

"Come into my office, I've got something for Gus," Kevin replied and hurried into the crow's nest office.

Patty followed with her notebook. "Tina has called four times this morning looking for you."

"It kind of makes you wish you had caller ID on your desk phone, doesn't it?" Kevin replied and then pulled one of the Nokia phones out of the bag. "That way you could let Tina's calls go to voicemail."

"Yeah, I guess, but that would be rude. My job is to take calls, whoever is calling."

"I'm just fooling around," Kevin smiled and pulled a second phone from the green bag. "Tina can be a real see-you-next-Tuesday. She called Gus a retard, and that is why I didn't go down to Florida to hang out with her." Kevin pulled a third phone from the bag.

A hard-to-hide smile came to Patty's face. "I've heard her use the 'retard' word also. Gus is borderline savant on the Autism intellect scale. Look at yesterday when he had the coach pull you from the game. His statistical charting works."

Kevin frowned. "I had my mind on dove wings after listening to you and Gus say they represented the Holy Ghost. I think Gus believes in…" Kevin paused, disgusted with religion, especially the Catholic faith. "Gus was right to tell the coach to bench me."

"Is that phone for Tina?" Patty asked, aware that Kevin wasn't spiritual. "Nope!"

Patty was perplexed. She was never good enough to be in Tina's girl group. Hearing Kevin say 'See you next Tuesday' was wrong, but it felt good at the same time. "I give, who is that phone for?"

"This one is for you. You can call Gus and talk religion, but we only have ten hours of usage time per month."

"I would love to talk with Gus," Patty replied genuinely.

"This last phone is for CP. He will have to hunt around for reception spots, but I did get reception from my bag phone in the Timberline Lodge parking lot and in Zigzag near the Ranger Station." Kevin handed two phone boxes to Patty.

Patty took the two phones. "I'm sure CP will call Gus also."

"That's great," Kevin replied. "But leave me out of any God talk. I've seen the hypocrisy where a former Gonzaga University President was involved in the sexual abuse of boys and young men. Some Jesuit officials covered for him, and he got assigned to another catholic institution to continue his sick behaviors and harm more children! He needed a millstone tied around his neck."

"Is that why you gave up your basketball scholarship at Gonzaga? I've heard rumors from the Sparks basketball team."

"That's ancient history!" Kevin unplugged a cellphone that was charging. "I'm going to go get Gus set up with his cell phone." Kevin got to the door, turned, and lifted his shirt. "Check this out. The phones have a belt clip. I bet in the future they'll have phones that fit in your pocket. Who knows, they might even be able to send video."

"Now you're sounding like Gus with a comic book character wrist phone," Patty replied as Kevin sprang down the stairs.

From the loading dock, Kevin scanned the parking lot and spotted the American flag moving between rows of parked cars. Kevin whistled and started waving his arms, hoping to get Gus's attention.

One rough-looking worker with tattoos up and down both arms noticed Kevin. The oversized biker cupped his hands up to his mouth and yelled, "Hey Gus, the boss is looking for you!"

It felt like a foghorn had just blasted in Kevin's ear. Gus started riding toward the dock. "Thank you," Kevin said, turning around.

"No problem." The shipping and receiving clerk went back inside.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Kevin Trask," Gus said as he parked his three-wheeler, making sure that the back tires touch the concrete wall, the way the big trucks did while loading or unloading.

Kevin hopped off the shipping dock and pulled the phone and charger from the green bag. "Gus, I want you to check in with Patty once or twice a day after you do your rounds with this radio phone."

Gus was awestruck! Kevin clipped the phone to the three-wheeler's rear basket, but Gus needed to keep an eye on it. The big biker noticed the anxiety with the location and hopped off the dock. "Gus, I have a coffee cup holder on my Road King. Let me show it to you."

The trio walked over to the motorcycle parking area. Gus sat on the new Harley Road King, and the cell phone fit inside an aluminum thermos coffee cup without a problem. It took about 20 minutes to transfer the official Harley-Davidson accessory mount onto the three-wheeler's handlebars. An inconspicuous crowd was now observing from the dock. Kevin jogged toward the workers to retrieve the box, charger, and most importantly, the operating manual. In a week, Gus would have the instructions memorized.

Kevin put the box and accessories in the rear basket. "Gus, ride to the guard shack, and I'll call you."

Gus got on the three-wheeler and rode to the guard shack. It took Gus a few minutes to locate the green ON button. "This is security officer Gus Watt. Over and out."

"Gus, I can hear you just fine. Can you call Patty's number in ten minutes? Her phone number is on a three-by-five card in the instruction book."

"Roger that, Mr. Kevin Trask. We should synchronize our watches."

"Sure, Gus." Kevin pulled the inscribed watch from his pocket. "I have fourteen-thirty-five."

"Roger that. I will call Ms. Patty at fourteen forty-five. Over and out." Click

Kevin hit the end button and clipped the Nokia cell phone onto his belt.

"Hey, Mr. Steel-toed safety expert!" A foghorn of a voice bellowed out and got Kevin's attention. The muscular, tattoo-covered arm gave Kevin the thumbs up, and so did some of the other workers. Kevin half nodded with a slight wave.

Approaching Patty at her desk, he asked. "Do you have your phone on?"

Patty looked at the two boxes. "Which one is mine?"

"You should know in a few minutes," Kevin replied.

"Okay, Kevin, but before you leave tonight, we need to go over the weekly planner."

"We will," Kevin replied. "I have a few things I need you to check on before I fly back to Michigan."

"That's right. You need to pick up your car at the Lansing airport," Patty replied as she checked to make sure both cell phones were on.

"I don't want to drive across the Midwest again." Kevin frowned.

"Maybe I can arrange a pickup with one of the transport companies that hauls Trask trailers," Patty suggested and then wrote a note to herself.

"That would be great," Kevin drew a breath of relief. "I hate to ask this… But, since you're a better Christian than I am, could you pick up a baptismal present for a baby boy?"

Patty frowned at Kevin. "I shouldn't do that. Plus…" Just then, the display on one of the cell phones lit up, and the phone rang. Patty picked up the phone.

"Security officer Gus Watt checking in. Over and out!"

"Hello, security officer Gus Watt. Thanks for checking in."

"Roger that. Over and out." Patty's cell phone went dead.

Kevin was just inside his office door, and Patty was at his heels. She waited for Kevin to sit down before she let him have it, "I don't want to hear that better-than-thou Christian crap from you. Who is the guy who has been taking Gus to basketball games and then out to dinner on Sundays? Who is the guy who just gave him a cell phone? And what about the three-wheeler?"

"I didn't get him the three-wheeler. You and CP did all that. That is how you two met."

"Kevin, you're the guy who set everything into motion and paid for the three-wheeler," Patty contended.

"Well, I haven't been going to church or anything since middle school," Kevin reasoned back.

"And what do you think is more important? Sitting in church, thinking you'll be saved by grace, or being a true friend to Gus? The Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling council, did not crucify Jesus themselves; they condemned Him and handed Him over to the Roman authorities. A bunch of hypocrites were the ones who crucified Jesus! Kevin, it is both works and grace…"

"Ah… Okay, Patty, I'll ask Condi to pick up a baptism gift. Sorry, I don't even know where to get something with dove wings."

"Kevin, that night we spent on the houseboat, when we prayed for Benny, I saw that you love children." Didn't you give Benny your designer sunglasses that day?

"It was because Benny found them for me. You know, finders, keepers—losers, weepers."

"May the perpetual light shine upon Benny." Patty offered up.

Amen, Kevin offered up and then said. "I wish Benny were here to find the red binder Gus entrusted to me."

Patty shook her head side to side, silently quizzed herself before asking, "Was that the red binder that the old man helped Gus finalize superhero plans?"

"Yep, he stayed over the weekend in the parking lot. Our mechanic put in a battery and did a tune-up on his motor home. We shipped a footlocker of stuff to the Philippines for him."

"Was his name Acorn or something like that?" Patty asked.

"His name was Nick Icorn," Kevin replied, concerned. "Do you think the red binder got shipped in the footlocker?"

"I don't know? But I can go down to shipping and receiving and get the address and then contact that family that we shipped the footlocker to."

"That would be great!" Kevin replied with a sigh of relief. "Gus has asked me several times about the remodeling plans, and I keep changing the subject."

On the bus ride home, Patty's new cell phone rang; it was Gus, giving her a status update that the parking lot was clear. The call ended with, "Roger that. Over and out."

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Tim wanted to be over and out of his job. He had no plans to work for Mr. Hung Meng. He loaded the Y2K virus on a mini tape backup, then worked past midnight, deleting porn off of the lab computers. I need to involve the police. Next time that stubby Asian prick leaves something to try to scare me, I'll take the Y2K evidence right to the police. Better yet, I'll go to the FBI or CIA. I don't know where Hung Meng is from, but he is not American.

Tim parked and surveyed around the apartment building. He used a flashlight and checked for footprints under the windows before opening the front door. Everything looked untouched inside! He dashed to the bedroom, yanked open a closet, and then a safe. He took out handcuffs, a 38 Smith & Wesson, and a pill container that held his supply of Rohypnol. He quickly packed a sports bag, a garment bag, and loaded the gun. Leaving in the middle of the night was the plan.

Tim froze when he opened the trunk—the custom leather case of his private 8mm tapes was gone! The phone started ringing from inside the apartment. At three in the morning, it sounded as loud as a car alarm blasting. He stuffed the 38 S&W into his waistband, rushed into the apartment, and picked up the landline. "If the police show up, they will most likely find your private sex tapes."

Tim crouched and duckwalked back to his car, slammed the trunk, got in, and sped off. Driving North across the Golden Gate Bridge, the Monica Lewinsky case was the hot topic on late-night AM radio. Tim admired a leader who could have his way with

women, call it an inappropriate relationship, and then jet away on the Lolita Express for relaxation parties.

Mr. Hung Meng didn't fully understand how scandals played out in the United States. In communist China, adulterous women were done away with. Most of Tim's sex videos were with girls over the age of consent. The first three tapes of when Tim was in high school didn't matter. The grainy black-and-white camcorder videos were past the statute of limitations, and the athletic director stated that it was just teenagers fooling around; Tim was underage back then as well.

Mr. Hung Meng was unaware that athletes in the United States are held to a different standard. As long as they performed on the court or on the field, what they did in their personal lives often got a free pass. Starting in Middle school, coaches will testify that the star-struck girl threw herself at three or four of their star players. Turning a blind eye was the mantra of the game book of winning, no matter what. One lone girl calling out that she was deflowered only turns alumni, the fans, and some school board members silent. The news media would pile on, destroying the sanctity of virginity was another stab at Christianity.

Tim's game plan was not only to get the money back that Tina had stolen, but to start building a new and better video library. A threesome with a girl-on-girl fight would be a great start—different than the child videos Myung Chan got addicted to. Sue had been seeking revenge ever since Tina hooked up with Tim at Shasta Lake. At least that was Tim's story. Sue secretly shared that Tina had come to Cleveland to hide, and they had gone to Florida to have fun in the sun.

Maybe I'll give Tina a bigger dose of Rohypnol and video Sue beating the crap out of her. I'll conclude the filming by having rough sex with both whores. Sue still needs to be punished for trying to trap me when she deliberately stopped taking the pill...

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Gus and Nick Icorn were the only US citizens who thought a missing boat south of Long Beach, California, was not a mere coincidence. He called Kevin on his new cell phone. "Mr. Kevin Trask, did you hear the news?"

"No, Gus. I'm just pulling into the Pasadena Country Club to have dinner with my parents."

"Mr. Kevin Trask, they're coming!" Gus anxiously said into the new cell phone

"Who's coming?" Kevin asked as he got out of the Land Rover and tossed the key to the valet.

"The invaders in their mini-sub. They sunk a boat south of the underwater tunnel and …"

"Gus, why don't we talk in the morning? I'm just about to have dinner."

"Okay, Mr. Kevin Trask! But make sure that you look in the red binder. All the protection diagrams and building plans for the old Navy training room are in there."

Kevin paused; he still couldn't remember where he had left the red binder. "I'll get with Patty in the morning, and we'll go over the plans," Kevin lied.

"Roger that. Over and out." Gus ended the call.

Kevin was clipping the cell phone onto his belt when he approached the table.

Linda Trask stood and hugged Kevin. "I love you," she whispered into Kevin's ear.

Robert Trask stayed seated. "You need to get one of those walkie-talkie phones for Condi. Her feelings were hurt when she saw the ones you gave to Patty and Gus."

"Oh crap! I didn't even think about that." Kevin replied as he pulled out a chair.

"Yeah, why don't you get one for your mom also. For when we go on our RV trip to Mexico?"

"They don't work that well unless you're around a big city," Kevin replied.

"I'm sure that they make improvements weekly, just like computers," Robert replied. "Get one for me too."

Dinner turned out pleasant and lasted late into the night. They toasted to the Trask family nearing the end of a dynasty with some of the best wine that the country club had on hand. Robert gave Kevin full credit for finding the loopholes in the land sale contract. He told Linda that if not for Kevin, the family could have gone broke trying to service the debt on all their remote sales and service stores. The Cabernet Sauvignon worked its magic. Robert apologized to Linda for being a misogynist throughout most of their marriage and credited Condi and Patty as strong female leadership examples. The only downside not mentioned was the probability that some or all of the manufacturing jobs would be outsourced.

The salesman added three more phones to the family plan and ten more hours of monthly talk time. He hinted about a corporate plan for all the managers at Trask Inc. Kevin acted interested, yet didn't say that Trask Inc would soon be under new ownership.

Kevin stopped on the first floor and headed toward Condi. "You're in our family group now. We have twenty hours of talk time between seven of us." Kevin handed her one of the cell phone boxes.

"Who is in the group?" Condi coyly asked.

"Gus, CP, Patty, you, and my mom and dad," Kevin answered.

"Your Dad? He won't even learn how to use a computer."

"You're right, but…" Robert Trask came out of his office.

"Are those the new radio phones for Linda and me?" Robert approached.

"Yes. They have a scheduler, alarm clock, address book, and games."

"Linda will like that." Kevin handed over two boxes.

Robert handed the two phones to Condi. "When you get time, set these new-fangled squawk boxes up." When Robert turned, Condie shot 'The Look' at Kevin.

While Condi unboxed the new phones, she listened through the open office doors.

"Dad, I don't think I'm going to move down here into your office. I think I'll have Condi move in here and have Patty move into her space. That little desk up in the hallway is cramped and way too small."

"So you're going to be up on the second floor all by yourself?"

"You know that I got some logging operations going on up in Oregon. It just might be better to keep the two businesses separated."

"Whatever you want. It probably won't be for more than six months before we get cashed out anyway."

"It looks that way. I think Gus is ready to move off-site also." Kevin replied with confidence and then exited the office.

Patty met Kevin at the top of the stairs. "Gus called on his cell phone about submarines in Long Beach Harbor."

"Can you handle that, Patty?" Kevin asked and darted into the office.

Patty followed. "Officer Bull Elk called and said that he had some information for you. He said it wasn't about logging!"

"Thanks. I'll call him before I go home." Kevin sat down behind the desk.

"Tina called three times, and she thinks I'm not giving you your messages."

"I'll call her before I go home," Kevin replied.

Remember, Florida time is three hours ahead of Pacific time

"A Father Mike called and said he wants to hit you up for a donation for the Harper Research project at Notre Dame." Patty was now reading from her notes.

Kevin looked up and thought for an extended time. "Can you look into that Harper project and see if it is a worthy cause?"

"Sure." Patty made a note on her pad.

"Lilly called and said you should book a steelhead trip soon. Since she testified in Washington, D.C., all these congressmen

have been booking her as a fishing guide. She also said that her mouth hurts."

"What!" Kevin looked directly at Patty. "Congressmen and Lilly's mouth hurts. What the hell is that all about?"

Patty's face started turning red. "Ah… I didn't mean it like that. Ever since Lilly got braces a week ago, her mouth has been hurting her."

"Lilly got braces?"

"Yes, since Condi got Aflex to add orthodontics to the dental plan, the Saxtons are on your logging business as employees and…"

"Okay, I know about a painful sore mouth; I had braces." Kevin snapped as he looked down at the pile of papers on his desk. "FYI, Patty, you will be moving down to Condi's area."

"What?" Patty snapped back and let her notepad drop to her side.

"Yep," Kevin looked back up. "Condi is moving into my dad's office, and you are going to move down to her space."

"So, you're going to be up here all by yourself?" Patty guardedly asked.

"Yeah, when I'm here. I want to start spending more time up in Oregon. I haven't even seen the helicopter loading operation yet."

"CP says that the open-belly Chinook is deadlifting logs like a weight lifter on steroids. He'll be home all next week?" Patty said, trying hard to hide a smile.

"That's right! I'll be up there next week, and CP will be back down here. Maybe I'll get to go fishing? That is, if Lilly is not feeling sore."

"I'll give her a call and see how she's feeling and if she can fit you in."

Thanks. I know CP, and you will have a lot of honeymooning to do. But don't forget about picking up Gus for the Sunday basketball game.

"Gus has already over-and-out called two times to ask if CP and I would like to attend Mass with him on Sunday before driving to the Poinsette Rec Center."

"Ah… I hope I didn't start something with the cellphones."

"Not at all. Before Cecelia, my twin, died, we would chit-chat a couple of times a day. That's how I feel talking with Gus about God."

Chap 31—————Played or teased

The San Francisco Bay Area has three major international airports. Tim knew that Hung Meng would most likely have spies posted at all three. He stopped at Marin Headlands viewpoint on the north end of the Golden Gate Bridge, found a payphone, and booked a redeye flight to Florida. Normally, he would never spend $ 2,600 on a one-way coach ticket. Being six-four, even a first-class ticket is a miserable cross-country flight. Then it would be a 3.5-hour high-speed ferry ride over to Key West to teach Tina and Sue a lesson. He knew deep down what they really desired—to fight over the captain of the Blue Devil basketball team. Tim didn't have any checked luggage but still had to go to the ticket counter for a boarding pass.

"Mr. Baylor, it's your lucky day, you're being upgraded on the first leg of your flight into PDX." The ticket agent said while looking over Tim's ID.

"Isn't PDX an airport in Portland? I have a direct redeye flight to Florida."

The agent started typing on the booking terminal. "Well, it looks like someone at Hung Meng Imports changed your itinerary? There is a contact number for you to call. Would you like me to write it down?"

Tim's knees buckled; he had to lean hard against the ticket counter! He looked back over both shoulders. "Ah… Yes, write the number down."

The agent wrote the phone number on a scrap of paper and clipped everything together. "You can use the Alaska Airlines courtesy phone at gate nine. Have a good flight, Mr. Baylor."

At the gate terminal, Tim found the bright yellow courtesy phone and dialed it. The line didn't even ring once. "We will furnish the Coast Guard with the longitude and latitude coordinates of the life raft your brother is in. That is, if you follow the orders that will be left for you at the Indian Head Casino in Warm Springs, Oregon." ***Click***

The first ticket listed the departure time to Portland, Oregon, at 7:38 pm; a motel reservation was included in the envelope. It was past midnight when the shuttle dropped Tim off at the Holiday

Inn in Portland. A red indicator was blinking on the nightstand phone. Exhausted, Tim sat on the edge of the bed and listened to the message. "The Coast Guard has been given the GPS coordinates of the life raft. A mini-sub periscope got a visual of a life raft. It looks like three living and several floaters." ***Click***

Hallway noise and motel room doors opening and closing stirred Tim from the bed around 6:00 am. A large envelope had been slipped under the door with a car rental agreement, a map, and a room reservation at the Indian Head Casino. The map had several locations circled in red near Mt. Hood on Highway 26. He scanned the morning news channels and eventually found a clip about a captain and some crew members being rescued at sea. The Baylor's always put themselves first.

On the drive east, Tim stopped in Zigzag, one of the red-circled places on the map. The next circle was up at Timberline Lodge, where he had lunch and asked around about Bull Elk. No one recognized the name, Bull Elk. Another hour down the southeast slope of Mt. Hood to Warm Springs. When Tim checked in at the Indian Head Casino, the desk clerk referred to Bull Elk as Officer Mike Jones. He then pointed to the Warm Springs Tribal Police Department on the map taped to the desktop.

From his room, Tim spotted a native American museum, a large lumber mill, a rundown Shell gas station, and a mini-market without any windows. Warm Springs was a small Indian town at the bottom of a deep valley that had been cut by the Deschutes River millions of years ago.

On the morning of day two, Tim observed that Mike Jones was unfit and overweight. AKA Bull Elk used a walking stick to go from the police station to the motor pool lot. Hung Meng's specific instructions not to leave fingerprints or handprints were taken as read—the deadline to finish the mission before Thanksgiving was noted. The last red circle on the map was on the remote southeast slope of Mount Jefferson; the closest town was Camp Sherman. The drive due west on a dusty gravel road turned from high desert to pine and fir trees after twenty miles of bumpy white-knuckle driving. A logging truck forced Tim off into loose gravel; the rental needed to be put in Four Wheel Drive to get going again.

Out of nowhere, in the road ahead, there was a flagger holding an orange warning sign. Tim slowed and was stopped by a Native American wearing a yellow hard hat; "Bull Elk Logging" was stenciled above the brim. The skinny woman was more than glad to answer Tim's questions; he was only the third person she had stopped all morning. Tim gathered enough information to know that the only day there would be no logging on Biddle Pass Butte was Sunday. He also found out that a road permit was required for driving on forest roads on the reservation. Aiana took up Tim's one-

hundred-dollar offer to be a guide and show him the best place to hunt for antler sheds. They made plans to meet on Sunday morning in the Casino parking lot. Tim knew not to leave clues and asked if a road pass was required if she was riding in the car. He also suggested that she bring another female friend. *Two Squaws fighting over me and then Tina and Sue fighting could go viral on the dark web…*

Madras was the closest town for supplies. The Ace Hardware store had a shovel, rope, gloves, and plastic tarps. Tim was careful to pay cash so as not to leave a paper trail. Back in his room at the Indian Head Casino, he checked his supply of Rohypnol. He had enough to drug two women, but Bull Elk was over two hundred and fifty pounds. Tim popped out the revolving cylinder of the 38 Smith and Wesson—it was fully loaded.

Sunday morning, Aiana had her own weapon readied. A boning knife with an antler handle was sheathed at her inside thigh. It would take about two hours to take Tim up to Biddle Pass Butte to the logging site. She hopped into the SUV. "Take a left out of the casino parking lot."

"You didn't bring a friend." Tim put on the turn signal.

"I don't have many friends left on the Rez." Aiana intentionally didn't buckle up.

"Oh, why's that?" Tim turned east onto Highway 26.

"Drugs and alcohol," Aiana quipped and then mapped directions. "Before crossing the Deschutes River, we'll head west directly toward Mt. Jefferson and stay on Tenino Road for twenty miles. Then we cross Milk Creek and head due south on Whitewater Access for another ten miles or so. The Cascade Mountains will always be on our right and the Metolius River on our left. There is no way to get lost, if you remember mountains west, river east."

"Sounds like you people know directions and the outdoors."

"Native Americans are hunters and gatherers. We tread lightly on Mother Earth."

"Yeah, I could see that at the casino. Your people gathered a lot of my money." Tim said in a sarcastic tone.

"What are you looking for up there?" Aiana asked.

"I've heard that antler sheds are an aphrodisiac, almost as potent as Rhino horn," Tim answered and then flashed a creepy, sick smile.

Now, Aiana wished that she had brought a friend or at least told her mother where she was going… It was a bumpy, dusty couple of hours to get to Biddle Butte, a sparse clearing on top of a rock outcropping. There was a deck of old-growth cedar trees fifteen feet high; a trailer with a blue outhouse on it, a second trailer with a large fuel tank; it smelled like Christmas from a burn pile of scrub white firs. Tim jumped out of the rental SUV and climbed onto a

Skidder, which had a small push blade at the front and a large cable spoon at the back. He started looking for a way to start the logging equipment.

Aiana ran to the Skidder, "You shouldn't be playing on this. Kenneth Saxton would have a fit!"

"Well, he left it out here. So, it's fair game." Tim yelled down at Aiana.

Through a dense stand of trees, Tim spotted the retrofitted military CH-234 Chinook helicopter. The army camouflage paint did a good job, but Tim had it in his sights. Aiana was at his heels until he paused to go up through the open belly of the huge twin-bladed helicopter and tried to squeeze his six-four frame into the pilot's chair.

"You can't be in there!" Aiana yelled from the back.

"A midget must fly this thing!" Tim said as he searched for a way to adjust the seat.

"The pilot goes by Shrimp. He will be distraught if you touch or adjust anything. He calls this helicopter his baby…"

"Shrimp must be a shrimp," Tim muttered, frustrated that he couldn't get into the pilot seat.

"Shrimp is a decorated Desert Storm Veteran. Please show some respect and leave his stuff alone!"

Nobody ever got away with telling Tim what to do. "I'll tell you what Squaw. Have a beer with me, and I'll leave the midget's stuff alone."

Aiana pretended to drink the beer. She was used to being called worse things than a Squaw—most of her life, she had been known as a drunken two-bit whore. Her current 292 days of sobriety had her at a level of self-respect that nothing or nobody could close down.

Back at the SUV, Aiana took the open beer bottle and turned Tim's attention to an eagle perched in a dead snag. She poured out the beer.

Tim watched the eagle for a while, waiting for the Rohypnol to kick in. There was a warm stillness in the air as dark gray thunderclouds were stacking up against the Cascade Mountains. "How's the beer?" Tim finally asked.

"Good," Aiana replied and stood up from the log she was sitting on. "We should get going before this Thunderstorm opens up."

Tim grabbed Aiana's braided black ponytail and pulled her to her knees. "Not before you perform your Squaw duties." Tim unzipped his pants, thinking the date rape drug should have kicked in.

From her forced bent over position, Aiana pulled the boning knife from the sheath strapped to her leg and took an upward swipe at Tim. The steel blade grazed his forearm. He let loose of the black

braided ponytail. "What the hell? You should be all doped up by now!"

"Let's just end this peacefully. Just drive off, and I won't say anything." Aiana said, gripping the boning knife like an expert.

"Okay, don't go all savage on me!" Tim backed up to the SUV and opened the door. "I need to see if there is a first aid kit. You cut me, you stupid bitch!" Tim pulled the Smith and Wesson from the center console, turned, pointed it, and walked directly to Aiana. "I'll teach you to go up against a white warrior!"

The knife flew out of Aiana's hand when she landed on her back. Tim put the 38 up between her legs and fired a second time. "That's for being a drug user. You Dopers are spreading AIDS these days almost as fast as the Fag's. I just did the world a favor."

An ear-piercing squawk rang out through the wet, still air, and then a clap of thunder rumbled in the distance. Tim returned to the SUV for a first aid kit. The cut on his arm had quit bleeding and didn't require a bandage.

There was a flash of lightning followed by a louder clap of thunder and then another ear-piercing squawk. Tim took binoculars off the dashboard and scanned up the old snag. Suddenly, from out of nowhere, a giant Bald Eagle swooped down and landed on the top of the deck of stacked logs. The Eagle canted its white head to stare back in through the windshield, its bright orange eye locked onto Tim. For the longest time, the staring went on; neither would flinch. Tim had an audience; something he planned so carefully to avoid. But this was a bird, not the police or a witness. Tim's hand reached for the Smith and Wesson—there was only one way to end this stare down.

He fired the last four rounds; all four shots were low and penetrated into the butt of the highest stacked log. With spite, the giant bird turned its head, and what Tim did not see caught his attention. The eagle had only one eye. The message of turning a blind eye to what had just happened was an occurrence that happened all too often on the Rez. It started to pour; the blood evidence was being washed away. Killing a squaw was no more than a momentary numb feeling. Tim began making plans for Bull Elk.

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Two days later, Tim was caught off guard seeing Kevin Trask walk into the Warm Spring Police Station. Kevin was wearing dirty work clothes and not driving the limited-edition Mercedes sports car that Tina always raved about. He knew that there was a connection between Mr. Hung Meng and Trask Trailers, but didn't know much about the connection with Bull Elk. It was hard to tell through the binoculars, but it appeared that Kevin was carrying an

accordion file holder as he exited the Warm Springs police station. He followed Kevin back to a motel in Zigzag. It was already getting dark, and the tall Douglas fir trees cast shadows across the parking lot.

Tim had experience with popping college girls' car locks. It was too clumsy to use a Slim-Jim with gloves on. He pulled off the gloves and left a handprint on the Land Rover passenger window. He grabbed the portable brown accordion file holder. Back in the rental with the dome light on, he went through the documents. There were a bunch of legal documents regarding logging on the reservation. There was a $1 million insurance bond to cover the use of a Chinook helicopter for log lifting. There was a permit that permitted Kevin Trask to climb Mt. Jefferson. There was an Interpol report on Hung Meng Imports and a faxed handprint. It was pitch black by the time Tim returned the brown folder—minus the Interpol report.

Kevin hadn't heard the Land Rover door open or shut. Lying on the pine dresser next to the keys and a wad of money, the mobile phone battery was almost dead. Kevin didn't think to check messages on the new Nokia. Gus had called three times about a **Rescue at Sea** story in the LA Times. Condi called about the pending union decertification vote. Patty called to say a silk-bordered baptismal blanket was on its way. Linda Trask called to tell Kevin to be careful working around heavy logging equipment and extra careful around a helicopter. All the worries and concerning voicemail messages became mute—Kevin had forgotten to pack the phone charger.

Logging in the fall had advantages. One was that the sun didn't rise until almost 7:00 am. Kevin had just stepped out of the shower when he heard banging on the motel room door. "What's up, Lilly?" Kevin said, with just a towel wrapped around his waist, as he yanked open the door.

"I thought I'd stop by to see if you want to go Steelhead fishing this weekend?" Lilly took note of Kevin's lean, muscular bare torso.

"Ah… I can't this weekend," Kevin replied and took note of Lilly's new braces. "Is your mouth still sore?"

"What?" Lilly forced herself into the motel room.

Kevin hurried to the bathroom and yelled. "Patty told me about how your mouth hurt from the braces."

"Oh yeah," Lilly yelled and then mumbled, "Patty told me that you wanted to make my mouth hurt."

"What did you say?" Kevin stepped out of the bathroom while tightening the belt on his Dockers Khakis.

"Oh, nothing," Lilly mumbled again.

"I thought you said something about making your mouth hurt." Kevin walked over to Lilly, who was now sitting on the corner of the bed.

"I was just being crude." Lilly's face was turning red.

Kevin turned around and lifted his cashmere sweater a few inches. "Did I get a bruise from the hoist choker? I wasn't paying attention, and it hit me in the back yesterday."

Lilly pushed Kevin's sweatshirt up to his shoulders and then walked her fingers from the middle of his back down to the beltline above his right buttocks. "You got a pretty good bruise going on."

"A freak gust of wind spun Shrimp's copter yesterday. The end of the cable with the lift hook hit me in the butt. It threw me off the stack of logs and knocked the wind out of me."

"Wow," Lilly replied as she gently pulled on the waistband and looked further down. "Logging is dangerous! Are you sure you should be out there?"

"Hell yes, I should be out there! Falling trees, running heavy equipment, and hooking logs up to a CH-47 are all real work." Kevin answered in his best deep, man's voice. Then he cupped Lilly's chin and tilted it upward, kissed her on the forehead. "Just being careful not to hurt your mouth." Kevin smiled mischievously.

Lilly was pleasantly stunned and pulled at Kevin's belt. "Maybe I should check to see if that choker hurt anything else."

Kevin stepped back; the horseplay was going too far. He'd always been faithful to Tina. "I need to get to the PDX postal counter early. Patty overnighted a baptismal gift her grandmother made."

Given the sudden halt, Lilly wasn't sure whether she was being played or teased. "That's for the baby boy in Lansing, Michigan, isn't it?" Lilly jumped onto defense to avoid humiliation. "Patty told me her grandma embroidered a spirit dove over a baby boy praying, and that the edging is of Ziran luxury silk, China's finest."

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Tim had his own plans for Lilly! He now knew the three-way connection with Bull Elk logging, the Saxton family, and Kevin Trask. What he couldn't figure out was how, what, and why Mr. Hung Meng wanted to be involved with the trio. The Interpol printout didn't offer much. Mr. Hung Meng wasn't listed as a Chinese Communist or a Spy—in fact, none of the affiliation boxes were checked. The one thing that stood out was that his passport stamp allowed travel to any country in the world. It was like Hung Meng didn't exist, and that he had free rein over anyone or anyplace. Tim didn't care. All he had left to do was mail the Interpol report to Hung Meng.

While he was checking out of the casino, one of the security guards approached him at the reservation desk. The guard showed a sequence of security camera photos of Aiana waiting in the parking lot and then getting into the rental SUV. Tim knew he could have played the self-defense card, but after he fired the second shot up between her legs, that plan was ruled out.

Aiana was tossed out past a gate on an overgrown forest road, the 38 Smith and Wesson tossed into a slot canyon in the Mt. Jefferson wilderness. He had carefully inspected the rear of the SUV for blood. Now the blue plastic tarp and rope held less than a hundred pounds of flesh and bones, fifty feet off a forest road.

There was nothing the security guard could do. Tim didn't say much more than he had picked up a young girl because she looked hungry and cold. That the squaw pulled a knife on him and robbed him. Tim showed the Tribal deputy the cut on his forearm and said he wanted to press charges. He was released without prejudice.

Tim headed south on Highway 26; it was only ten minutes before he was off the Warm Springs Reservation without even being fingerprinted. The Redmond International Airport was less than an hour away. When he dropped off the rental keys, the agent dialed a contact number displayed on his monitor and then handed the phone to Tim over the counter.

"You should be checking this SUV back in, only if you have completed your task and have taken care of all possible loose ends." A stern warning beckoned over the phone.

"I obtained your Interpol file. Give me an address, and I'll mail it today," Tim replied with his hand cupped around the mouthpiece of the phone.

"Has the big Tribal police detective been taken care of?"

"What? I got the requested file for you. That was our deal," Tim moved away from the rental desk.

"Finish your mission and be back in your office the Monday after Thanksgiving. Your brother is home with his family. Every year, a lot of homes burn down from people cooking turkeys in oil fryers." *Click…*

Tim handed the phone back over the counter. "Check this SUV in. I need to rent something with a big trunk or maybe a van."

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Being six feet three, Ronda stood out in every place she went. Kevin couldn't forget the bloody nose she gave him, how she called him a rat, and mocked him for transferring to play on the Duke Blue Devils basketball team. Now they shared being Godparents.

After the baptism and at the celebration brunch, Ronda sat next to Kevin. "You know that we are now responsible for Benny being raised Catholic?"

"I understand. But that is only if something happens to both parents." Kevin answered with confidence. "God forbid, if it ever came to that. Yes, I would make sure little Benny Schultz is brought up in the Christian faith."

"He would have to be brought up Catholic. Only Catholics go to heaven!"

"I don't know if only Catholics go to Heaven. I'm leaving that call up to God." Kevin replied. "After what I saw at Gonzaga with the transferring of a pedophile priest, I'm not sure if the Catholics are in God's favor right now."

"That was one BS incident that the secular media blew out of proportion and…" Guests could overhear Ronda's ranting.

"What about the Jews? They claim to be the chosen ones. If you're not Muslim, according to Islamic teachings, then you are condemned as an infidel. Then there are the Mormons, the JW's, the fundamental Christians… Want me to go on?" Kevin rebuked.

"They're all wrong," Rhonda argued back. "Jesus gave the authority to St. Peter. The first pope and…"

Lawrence Shultz came to the rescue. "Mr. Trask, thank you for the hand-sewn, silk baptismal blanket. We plan to start a college fund with the savings bond. Thank you so much for coming all the way out to Michigan." Lawrence handed Benny to Kevin.

Kevin had never held a baby this young. The tiny fingers, the blinking, inquisitive eyes, the smooth skin, and the magnificent baby smell squelched all the religious debate. The innocence of a child was something Kevin had never experienced. He thought about a mother who never held the child she gave birth to—about Gus and the bonding that never happened with his mother, who died during delivery.

Time elongated before Rhonda got her turn to hold Benny. As Kevin passed the swaddled baby off, she looked Kevin squarely in the eyes. "There is nobody in this world who will be a better Godfather than you."

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Patty's excessive planning, scheduling, and getting the SL600 retitled made Kevin's hectic life run like a fine-tuned machine. She was spot on with the drive from Lansing, Michigan, to South Bend, Indiana. He checked into the five-star hotel late afternoon and went to the workout center to unwind before calling Tina. Patty had scheduled an appointment to hand-deliver a $25,000 check to Coach Mike McCall for the Harper Cancer Research fundraiser.

Kevin had a second thought about the check, since Tina needed help repaying what she had stolen from Baylor's on-site computer systems.

Kevin parked in front of the Joyce basketball Arena, took the twenty-five-thousand-dollar check, and ripped it in half. He dialed Coach Mike McCall and asked him to come outside to the parking lot. It wasn't three minutes before Mike busted out through the gym doors and spotted Kevin standing next to the special edition silver SL600-EX.

Coach Mike approached Kevin and extended a handshake. "Are you here to play a pickup game with the Fighting Irish girls? Ronda mentioned that she ran into you at her nephew's baptism."

"No, I'm keeping my distance from her. She's way too intense. She'd probably break my nose this time around."

"She's just like you were when I coached the Bulldogs. You were way too intense at correcting history at Gonzaga. If you had taken that intensity onto the court, you would have been the captain of the team."

"Maybe," Kevin replied, not wanting more religious right and wrong conversation. Kevin held out the car keys. "Maybe you can auction off my car for the Harper Cancer fundraiser. You'll have to get the mobile phone removed. These new Nokia phones work better." Kevin lifted his sweater to display the phone clipped to his belt.

"You're kidding! This Mercedes must be worth over a hundred thousand dollars."

"I think more." Kevin let his sweater drop. "All I need right now is a ride to O'Hare airport."

"No problem. I'll get Ronda. She's been telling the girls that she is going to work you over."

"Work me over, what the hell does that mean?"

"Well, Ronda's a woman who gets what she wants." Coach Mike winked at Kevin. "She wants you to join our coaching staff."

Chap 32—————That Final Breath

Thanksgiving Day has many meanings in different countries around the world. Kenneth Saxton only knew the oral story of a day set aside for prayer, a day that the pilgrims and Native Americans shared a meal and gave thanks. Being illiterate made fact-checking difficult. Ken had to rely only on spoken words. All the years of going to church with Mary helped him grasp the Christian faith; now Richard Johnson was helping him understand the Islamic faith. It didn't make sense that both faiths shared similar stories about Jesus and his mother Mary, but they had been enemies for almost 1400 years. Ken didn't care much; he was just happy that Richard agreed to come to Thanksgiving dinner and not talk about religion.

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Bull Elk knew the more factual history of Thanksgiving. About how Squanto taught the Pilgrims, who were weakened by malnutrition and illness, how to cultivate corn, extract sap from maple trees, catch fish in the rivers, and avoid poisonous plants. Squanto also helped the settlers ally with the Wampanoag, a local tribe. Their alliance would endure for more than fifty years and remains one of the few accounts of the first Thanksgiving. Tragically, Squanto died at the age of forty-two from smallpox. Historians often referred to European epidemics such as smallpox as "Indian Fever" to shift ownership.

Blaming Native Americans' problems on the Whiteman wasn't in Bull's DNA. It was the Tribal Elders who voted to legalize gambling against Bull's warning of all the added problems a casino would bring. Already, crack cocaine addicts overloaded the Warm Springs alcohol and drug rehab center. Bull had to use his influence to get his niece a bed in the overburdened halfway house and also

got her the flagger job at the helicopter logging operation. Aiana hadn't checked in for three nights and was missing the Thanksgiving spread at the halfway house.

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Officer Elk got the 911 call about dead eagles at the logging site. He told the dispatcher that he'd be there within the hour. He checked out a truck from the motor pool and snapped a shotgun into the floor-mounted gun holder.

Tim fine-tuned his shrewd and evil plan as he waited. Purchasing the 22-caliber varmint rifle at an outdoor store in Madras didn't require a three-day wait like a handgun would. The store also had the RV sewer flex hose that he needed. The thought of killing another Indian had a more powerful feeling than the big game hunts the Baylor's went on in Africa. Tim had everything worked out. The plan had to be flawless because a dead tribal police officer could warrant an investigation by the FBI.

Tim waved his arms over his head when the white police truck rounded the last corner and busted out through a cloud of red cinder dust. The smell of the overheated engine rolled out from under the hood. Officer Bull put a firm grip on the shotgun in the holder mounted between the floor and the dash.

Tim jogged up to the passenger door. "The dead eagle is up the hill behind that log deck past the huge helicopter."

"What color is its crown?" Bull asked.

"I think it was almost bald with red around its beak," Tim answered quickly.

"I don't think a Bald Eagle would be way up here. There's no fish for them to hunt."

"I'm not sure. I don't know about birds." Tim didn't like the questioning.

"A bald eagle has a white crown and an orange beak." Bull Elk took note of the long, steep trail past the helicopter landing area.

"I'm not really sure what kind of eagle it is. But aren't all eagles protected?" Tim asked.

"Not on a reservation. The Eagle Feather Law allows my people to use eagle feathers for spiritual and cultural practices. Now, if a Whiteman kills an eagle, we can fine him up to twenty-five thousand dollars." Officer Bull grabbed a walking stick leaning against the shotgun holder. "You don't mind if I look in your car?"

"No, go right ahead." Tim had hidden the 22-caliber rifle inside the belly of the Chinook helicopter, inside a wooden trunk full of smoke-jumper parachutes.

Bull looked through the rental car's backseat windows. "Can I check the trunk?"

"Sure, not a problem." Tim opened the trunk and stepped back.

"What's the RV sewer hose and broom for?"

"I'm staying at Camp Sherman in an RV. A raccoon chewed the old hose."

"That's odd for a Gv-tli, unless it was rabid."

Tim hand-slapped the lid of a red cooler, hoping not to be asked more questions. "I have water and other drinks if you're thirsty."

"No thanks." Bull replied. "Show me where that dead eagle is."

Tim's fine-tuned plan was on track. By the time they made it to the helicopter landing area, Bull was gasping for air.

"The big bird is several yards ahead at the base of that dead tree."

Bull crept ahead and then used his walking stick to turn the big bird over. It took a minute for him to catch his breath. "This is no eagle… It's a vulture…"

"Don't know. But that is a huge bird!"

"They can have up to a six-foot wing span but never weigh more than ten pounds," Bull answered. "Could you carry it back to my truck?"

"I'm not touching it!" Tim yapped, then asked, "What are you going to do with it?"

"I'll have the open up its stomach to see what kind of carcass that raptor had been eating on."

Tim's throat tightened. "You really look pale. You're sweating like a storm. Leave that filthy thing for a hazmat team."

"Actually, by having a bald head, it prevents bacteria from sticking to feathers, and they urinate on their legs to kill bacteria. Turkey vultures are remarkably clean."

"You can carry it if you want."

"No can do… I'm going to need a sugar bump." Bull was feeling hypoglycemic. "Do you have fresh orange juice or a non-diet soda in your cooler?"

"I have regular Pepsi, Gatorade, and beer." Tim ducked under Bull's arm. He had to get Bull back to the truck so as not to mess up the perfect crime.

"I'll take the soda! I need sugar... I forgot my diabetes kit on my horse," Bull rambled, steadied himself with the walking stick, and leaned hard into Tim.

I need to get him to the truck… I need to get him to the truck… Tim kept telling himself with every step.

I feel Grandfather Eagle Eye watching… I see Aiana on her pony… The spirits are talking… Bull was hallucinating by the time they got back to the police pickup.

"Here you go, big guy," Tim handed Bull Elk a sixteen-ounce Pepsi through the passenger window and watched him gulp down half of the brown soda.

While the sugar was balancing Bull's blood glucose, the Rohypnol took over his muscles. Bull hadn't felt this relaxed since sitting in a Jacuzzi after the Oregon high school playoff game. He dreamt all the way back to when the White Buffaloes played in the state championship. Billy Saxton scored their only touchdown that game, preventing a shutout. Losing by thirty points didn't matter—he'd played his hardest and offered up that sixty-minute life-lesson to the spirit in the sky.

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Finally, it was done! Tim pulled the flexible sewer hose from the passenger-side window and then from the exhaust pipe. Tim used the broom to cover up his footprints in the dirt around the police truck. He wiped down the passenger door for fingerprints, raised the window, and pried the plastic Pepsi bottle from Bull's stiff grayish fingers. The truck would run for a few hours before it ran out of gas. By that time, Tim would be in a cheap motel near the Redmond airport watching the Detroit Lions and Dallas Cowboys. Last-minute flights on a holiday were too expensive, plus his credit card was almost maxed out. He was dissatisfied that the Redmond area wasn't listed on the Back-Door adult hookup app—he was still aroused by a final breath.

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Kenneth and Richard were watching the game. Ken was snoring in his worn-out recliner, and Richard was sprawled out on the couch, with his hands folded across his gorged belly. Amazingly, the apple pie plate hadn't slipped off Kenneth's chest. Richard would let out an occasional moan or yip, depending on who had the ball when he'd open his eyes. They had no plans for Black Friday, not even to fall trees.

Mary was cleaning up in the kitchen and helping Lilly decide which shirt to wear under her fishing vest. The real decision was whether the bandana around her neck made her look taller. Mary suggested wearing the bandana with a light blue V-neck shirt while she loaded a cooler with Turkey sandwiches, half an apple pie, and wine for Lilly's steelhead client.

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Kevin didn't ask what the first-class ticket from Chicago O'Hare to Portland had cost. He was happy to check into a motel on Airport Way and get in bed before midnight. He slept soundly and had a dream about his grandfather and the many times he had preached on the carnal sins against the flesh and concupiscence. He was in the lobby when Lilly pulled into the parking lot and flashed the headlights. An aluminum drift boat was hitched behind the newer crew cab truck. The lobby doors split open, Kevin exited, tossed his stuff on the rear seat, and jumped into the front. "Think we'll catch fish today?"

"Don't know," Lilly answered with a smile full of braces.

"How's your mouth been feeling?" Kevin asked, returning the smile. "You smell good," Kevin added.

"Ah… Mom sprayed perfume on my bandana as I left. I need to be careful not to transfer the scent to the bait."

"Steelhead can smell?" Kevin asked.

"Yes, they olfact with their nares," Lilly replied.

"They do what?" Kevin balked, not sure if Lilly was already telling a fish story.

"They can detect odors with the small holes above their mouth." Lilly turned on the right blinker. "The fall run in the Sandy River is about over. Troutdale is a bit east of Portland, where the Sandy River dumps into the Columbia River. Are you good with camping overnight if the steelies are hitting?"

"Yeah, that sounds good," Kevin answered while wondering about the sleeping arrangement. "I'm really stoked to catch a steelhead and…" Kevin stopped midsentence, the Nokia on his belt vibrated.

"Kevin, there's been an accident on the helicopter site. They'd like you to stop by the guide shop in Zigzag ASAP."

"What happened? Did somebody get hurt?" Kevin questioned Patty with panic.

"I'm not sure. But I have a contact number for you to call."

There was a Warm Springs police car in front of the guide shop. Lilly turned into the parking lot, skidded in the gravel, jumped out, and ran up the three stairs. The bells on the back of the doors alarmed the sheriff deputy who was in the kitchen talking with Mary and Kenneth. Kevin waited outside on the porch, petting Tucker. The bells on the back of the door rang out again.

"Kevin, the deputy wants to talk to you!" Kevin followed Ken around the showcase, down the hallway into the kitchen.

"Mr. Trask, there was a terrible accident up on the Biddle Butte logging site. We found out that you are the silent partner and major financer of Bull Elk Logging. We need some answers."

"Not a problem." Kevin rubbed his chin and leaned against the counter near the sink. "What happened?"

"Well, Officer Bull Elk responded to a call about someone poaching Eagles up at the loading site, when he went into a diabetic coma."

"Is he okay?" Kevin immediately asked.

"No, he passed. We are not sure of the exact time. But it doesn't look like foul play."

The small kitchen was stifled with shock and disbelief. Mary pushed Kevin away from the sink and started a pot of coffee. Ken spoke about how Bull and Billy played football, and now they were back together playing on the big field in the sky. There was uncertainty about what would happen to Bull Elk Logging Inc. Lilly felt the loss of a good friend, as a deep resentment raged. To find out that Trask's money was behind the logging contracts hurt. Another case of the poor being indebted to the rich and powerful. Both Kevin and Patty had been deceptive and worked behind her back to float the million-dollar bond; no tribal money had been used. This new information hurt Lilly's pride.

"I'll head over to the Warm Spring Tribal office tomorrow and talk with the Elders," Kevin offered.

"Maybe you two can still get some fishing in?" Mary said, with as uplifting a tone as she could muster. "That's what Bull Elk would want."

"No thanks," Lilly quipped. "Bull didn't like the rich and powerful people who built the casino and brought all the other crap onto the Reservation. I'm not sure why he brought Californian money to the Rez to helicopter log."

There was a long, awkward silence. "I'm going to go let Rich know all that happened. Let him know there ain't going to be a Bull Elk Logging anymore." Ken stood up from the table, and Kevin followed him out into the parking lot. "You need a ride over to your motel?"

"No, I'll jog! It will give me some time to clear my head." Kevin yelled back over his shoulder. He was already headed west on Highway 26 with the warmth of a full sun beating onto his face.

The following day, it took the better part of the afternoon for the Tribal Chairman, the Tribal Council Representative, the Warm Springs, and the Wasco Chiefs to reach a tentative agreement. Out of respect for Bull Elk, AKA Mike Jones, Kevin agreed to the council's conditions on a handshake.

The new cell phone worked from the Tribal government offices parking lot. Patty said she would work overtime to ensure that insurance and other paperwork were up to date. Kevin called Condi to ask when the next meeting with Hung Meng was.

His long-term plan wasn't to sell off Trask Trailers only to become President of Bull Elk Logging. Condi totally understood Kevin's desire not to get stuck behind a desk like Robert Trask had been for the last thirty years. At the end of their conversation, Kevin slipped in how Richard had spent Thanksgiving Day with the Saxtons. Condi's response to that blip of information about her dad was cold as ice.

The front door to the guide shop was locked. Tucker heard the doorknob twist and ran down the hall; he pawed and licked at the glass. Kenneth came around the display case, pushed Tucker to the side, and opened the door. "How'd it all go with the Rez Council?" Ken asked.

"Okay," Kevin's reply was somber. "The Elders were fair, but they want more than I want to give. Bull did a lot for his people. I can't take his place. I have my own family snags to deal with."

"Bull was a great man. And what Lilly said about Bull not liking rich people, I don't know anything about that."

"I had to sign off on some documents today. I noticed Bull's legal name was Mike Jones."

"Yep, that was his American name."

"I didn't know Bull helped coach high schoolers," Kevin said.

"Yep, for the White Buffalo's. He drives those Indian boys to practice in Madras. They're in the state playoffs this year. Not a chance in hell they beat that Portland team."

"Yeah, I just found that information out," Kevin replied.

"They lost big the last time they made the playoffs."

Since Kevin had learned that the playoff was the last game Billy and Bull had played in, he quickly changed the subject. "Where's Lilly? I need to put off any fishing for a while."

"She's spending the night up at the cabin. The passing of Bull brought back memories. It's been a sad day for all of us."

"I can't imagine how hard it is to lose a family member."

"Yep, it has been a couple of years now," Ken replied. "Being busy out in the woods has helped me."

"Well, you're going to be busy. The Elders want fifty cords of firewood for the Casino."

"Damn! We'll have to cut Juniper trees out on the desert if it snows."

"Anyway, it's part of the deal. Both chiefs made me shake and sign a contract. I'm hoping you won't let me down."

"I won't. The work is good. Cuttin scrub Juniper isn't."

"You think I can make it on the dirt road to the A-frame with this rental car?"

"Maybe." Ken locked the shop door. "But if you get stuck this time of year, you could freeze to death. There's already been a

dusting of snow up at the cabin. Not smart to be driving that road when it gets dark."

"It's not dark yet," Kevin replied. No sooner had he started the car than Kenneth was tapping on the driver's window. Kevin lowered the window.

"I'll drive you up to the cabin."

When they crossed the creek and pulled out into the clearing, Lilly was bundled up, sitting on the deck, watching the sunset. Three empty beer cans were on the cable spool table. She shot them the leave-me-alone look. The look that dads who lived through hormonal cycling daughters turning into young women knew was not fun or welcomed. "Hop out! Lilly can bring you home!"

Kevin didn't understand the urgency and jumped out. Kenneth circled back in the clearing and left the 'leave me alone' scowl in the rear-view mirror.

Lilly slammed her beer down, met Kevin at the bottom of the stairs, and started to pound her fist on his chest. "We Saxtons don't need all your Trask money! We don't need you to make us rich. We are just fine being poor."

"What is your problem!" Kevin grabbed Lilly's wrists to stop the chest thumping.

"All you rich and powerful people show up and flash your money around, thinking we're all a bunch of uneducated, low-life, white trash."

"I've never said that!" Kevin pushed Lilly back, still gripping her wrists.

"What about the million dollars you secretly gave to the Bull Elk Logging operation. We don't need a Californian handout."

It took small talk, turkey sandwiches, wine, and apple pie before Lilly quit glaring at Kevin. She listened to how Kevin's grandfather, Donald, worked almost every day except Christmas and Easter. Robert Trask worked almost the same way, even turning the golf course and the club into places to conduct business. The Trask lineage was full of workaholics. Linda was a professional tennis player, and her recent health scare was a life-changer for the Trask household. Kevin acknowledged that he was working to dissolve the partnership between Bull Elk Logging and Trask Inc. He shared that after the manufacturing plant was sold, he'd be taking some worldwide treks, but left out the fact that Tina would be his hiking partner.

Earlier, Lilly spotted a bottle of Whiskey in the rodent-proof cabinet. She stumbled into the cabin, grabbed the almost full brown bottle, and had to brace herself in the doorway as she returned. "Let's have a drink to all the rich people. To the few that aren't all bad."

Darkness overcame the daylight, and a brisk coolness was settling in. Kevin was three beers behind Lilly and foolishly decided to catch up on the hard stuff. Lilly backed off, realizing she was now the designated driver. She went back inside for blankets, and Kevin saw a shooting star as he took a chug off the whiskey bottle.

She tossed a blanket to Kevin and wrapped herself in the other. "I can't drive yet, but the coolness will help me sober up."

Kevin looked over at the wood-fired cedar tub. "Why don't we heat up the old soak tub? We can relax, toast Bull, and I can forget about what I got myself into today."

"I got my period. So, I can't get in." Lilly said, noticing the quart of bourbon was now half empty. "But I can fire it up for the rich city boy who wanted to put rich into the poor."

"What are you talking about?" Kevin poured a drink this time, not wanting to look like a college frat boy chugging off a bottle.

"Bull Elk would say you can't put the rich into the ranks of the poor. He'd say that it was a problem on a lot of reservations."

"Yeah, we talked about that. I call it the Robin Hood feel-good ploy… Stealing from the rich and giving to the poor leaves a tribe poor." Kevin hiccupped. "Collectivism never has and never will work." Kevin hiccupped again.

Lilly frowned. "What about screwing the poor out of what they deserve? Are you good at that?" Lilly wasn't sure why she always had to dig at Kevin. "Ah… I didn't mean that… I'm sorry."

"Don't worry about it."

"I apologize. It's that time of the month."

"Like, when you can't go swimming, ride a bike, or have fun?"

Lilly laughed. "No, I can go swimming and even ride a bike. But soaking in hot water wouldn't be a good idea. I could get a yeast infection from the heat."

It was taking Kevin an extended time to put things together. "Heat and yeast. Sounds like you could make bread."

"Don't be a stupid drunk," Lilly quipped. "Now you're sounding like Billy. He would say stupid stuff like that all the time!"

"Well, if you were my Big Sis, I'd be pranking and pulling your chain all the time. You'd be like the best big sister and…"

Lilly's face turned somber. She never liked being called 'Big Sis'. Even Bull Elk had thought of her that way. "I'll get the wood heater fired up so you can soak the night away."

"Nah, don't bother," Kevin canted forward and gripped the brown bottle. "I think I need a shot to warm up."

"Too bad Marie, your housekeeper, isn't here to skinny-dip in the soak tub with you."

"Not funny!" Kevin hiccupped and then took a drink.

Lilly disappeared into the cabin for a long bout of ten minutes. When she returned, Kevin was in a handmade Adirondack chair

with his head tilted upward and gripping the neck of the whiskey bottle. "The stars are so beautiful…" Two hiccups… "There are so many of them. Like… I saw like twenty shooting stars… And like, I got to pee!"

"Great," Lilly helped Kevin stand and ducked under his arm, walking him over to the edge of the deck. "You'd better aim over the top of the railing, so the pee doesn't splash back on us."

"Thanks. Ah… Ah… Big sis…" Kevin canted forward, almost going headfirst over the railing. Lilly saved him from the neck-breaker fall and helped him back to the Adirondack chair before he passed out.

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The sun was peeking over the top of the A-frame cabin. Kevin felt an instant chill all the way from his heels up to his butt and over his back. He rolled over; the zipper was down on the far zipped-together side of two sleeping bags. Kevin pushed a pillow off a foam mattress and, through the bottom roll of the window panes, saw bare legs. Lilly came out onto the deck with two steaming hot cups of coffee. "How's your head this morning?"

"Not that bad," Kevin lied while rubbing his pounding skull. When he reached for the coffee, he noticed he had absolutely nothing on. "What happened to my clothes?"

"They're drying out." Lilly pointed at Kevin's boxers, his pants, and her bandana hanging over the railing. "I told you to aim high! But you peed right at the railing. Pee splashed all over. I had to use my bandana to clean you up."

"Oh?" Kevin replied. When he took his eyes off the railing and looked back at Lilly, it felt like vertigo—level ten.

"It wasn't that cold last night, but there was still shrinkage." Lilly sipped at her coffee to conceal a shit-eating grin.

"What?" Kevin slowly lifted his head as Lilly leaned back in the very chair. She made one Father's Day for Ken. "Ah… do you have any aspirin?" Warm mush was rolling over and over in Kevin's skull.

"Don't you remember taking four Midol last night?" Lilly headed back into the cabin, holding back another grin. Screwing with Kevin's pickled mind was bittersweet.

Kevin was pulling on his pants when she came back outside with a glass of water and two Tylenol. "These should help."

"I'm glad you are always looking after me… Big Sis."

In that moment, bitterness raged from her heart. All her life, she'd always been the big sister—it really hurt hearing it from Kevin.

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Patty and Gus flew into Redmond Airport, rented a car, and met Kevin at the Warm Springs Tribal Administration building. "How was the flight?" Kevin asked after they had parked in front of the two-story red-brick building, one block west of Highway 26.

"Mr. Kevin Trask, it was like how Superman can leap over tall buildings. But we were way up there, leaping over mountains and lakes."

Patty was holding Gus's hand and could only offer a giant smile.

The plan was for Kenneth Saxton to wrap up Kevin's interest in Bull Elk Logging. The beetle-kill thinning project was on track to be completed before next summer's fire season. Kevin didn't care about the return on investment. Continuing to float the insurance bond was best to avoid jeopardizing the sale of Trask Trailers.

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CP was up on the southwest corner of the Reservation, setting sling chokers onto the twin-bladed C-47 helicopter. Too dangerous an area for Patty to bring him lunch and maybe sneak off into the woods for a Nooner. When Shrimp had the cyclic control in hand, at two thousand dollars an hour plus fuel, even a quickie wouldn't pencil out.

The cooler fall weather helped with lift and loading. Unlike the hot, thin air during Desert Storm, Shrimp wasn't all that concerned about lifting oversized loads. As long as he didn't have to hover for more than thirty seconds, he'd never have to detach a load. Ten tons of logs falling from the sky was known as a squish and hopefully not a fatality.

CP and Shrimp had been a team in battle, and that experience was paying off. Ken and Richard could barely keep up with the two additional log trucks they hired. All the years of managing crews at Trask Trailers paid off for Richard Johnson. He set a daily bonus for those with zero safety violations.

The Native American crew followed his instructions to the T. Kenneth would size a load by multiplying the butt diameters by the number of logs cinched together with a sling choker. The Heli-logging operation was running like a well-oiled machine without everyone watching out for Kevin's haphazard, careless work. The invincible do-or-die mountain-climbing mantra inside Kevin made him dangerous to himself and others.

Patty worked with the Warm Spring Tribal Council for three days, properly filing and recording paperwork. Gus got a personal tour of the Warm Springs Museum, was invited to show-and-tell at the middle school, and went to Mass at St. Kateri Tekakwitha Mission Church.

Catching fish on the Deschutes River with Lilly was something Gus wasn't sure about until Lilly explained why she used barbless hooks. Gus got more excited about releasing fish than catching them. On the last evening, CP, Patty, Gus, and Kevin met up and ate at the original Black Bear Diner in Madras, Oregon. Patty had invited Lilly to come with her, but she declined.

With any luck, by next spring, Kevin would be free of any business commitments and able to pursue his own dream. Pairing up with the right trekking partner was crucial. Tina showed interest, and the training and practice would be good for their relationship.

Kevin was on his way to the Do-or-Die mantra he learned in his college climbing club and carried onto the basketball court. Unlike what Grandpa Trask preached, Do and Die before that final breath. That last moment when you are judged by how much you love God, and by what you did for your neighbor.

Chap 33—————Can’t kill a legend

After school, on the Madras football field, the team took a knee and observed a few minutes of reflection in honor of their assistant coach. Kevin was introduced as a temporary fill-in for Bull Elk. Mainly, he was the van driver, making sure the seven Native American players got back to the Reservation after every practice. Kevin introduced Gus as a friend and a detail-oriented note-taker. This was apparent because Gus had already listed every player’s number in a column on green-lined graph paper attached to his clipboard.

After the first practice, Kevin chauffeured the players back to the Reservation in a well-used ten-passenger Ford van. The brakes overheated on the long downgrade into the Deschutes River Valley. The players yelled at Kevin, “Downshift, that’s what our coach always did!” At the bottom of the downgrade and with the smell of overheated brakes mixing with the seven sweaty football players, Kevin was thankful he’d only have to make this drive a few more times.

At the bottom of the downgrade, Gus spoke out, “Always put trust in the bigger hands of the great superhero in the sky—JC.” Two players elbowed each other and moved their heads up and down, affirming Gus’s words.

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The van ride to and from football practice the next day went better; Kevin managed the downgrade without turning knuckles white. Gus had passed his clipboard around to each player, making sure the double reverse play was correctly charted. When the smallest yet most curious boy quizzed Gus about the comic book superhero Geronimo, Gus resolutely informed him that Geronimo was not a comic book character; that Geronimo was a real person, a medicine man who was held as a prisoner of war three times,

and that Geronimo's name meant the one who yawns. Kevin didn't yawn, but he privately rolled his eyes. Gus was doing his own style of coaching.

The White Buffaloes would need a superhero on their team to beat a powerhouse Portland team. Jesuit High School recruits players, as some colleges do. Their star player this year was actually twenty years old; too old to play high school football. But his parents secretly had his birth certificate altered and then intentionally held him back in first grade. A small white lie that was about to pay off with a full-ride scholarship. All part of the winning at any cost mantra that some parents will do for a privileged or spoiled teenager.

Thursday, Kevin stopped at a pizza place to celebrate the last time he'd be driving the beat-up, smelly Ford van down the long two-mile grade into Warm Springs. Gus had the seven players mesmerized with more stories. Gus told how the "Hail Mary" play was coined by Knute Rockne way back in 1922, when the Fighting Irish came from behind to beat Georgia Tech. The seven players kept passing the clipboard around for a secret play that Gus was calling the 'Glory be' play. Kevin yawned—in two days, he'd be done with the commitment he made with the two chiefs to fill in for Coach Bull Elk.

Betting on high school football at the Casino or anyplace in Oregon wasn't allowed, but if it were, the odds would have been twenty to one. The Bosworth name from Jesuit High School drew college scouts to the Portland Civic Stadium. It was the ranchers and farmers on the east side of the Cascade Mountains against the big city fans on the west side. There was one line in the state playoff program stating that seven players on the Madras team represented the Warm Springs Reservation.

The first half of the game went as all the sports reporters had predicted. Joey Bosworth had already scored a touchdown and sidelined three of the White Buffalo players. Kevin just wanted the bloodbath to end. He knew firsthand the ugly side of high school sports, which started way back on pee-wee fields. Parents were living their own aspiration of stardom through football, basketball, and baseball, the big three team sports, which often fueled the level of sportsmanship beyond being fun.

Gus was tuned out to all the loud jeering and cheering by the hearing muffs Patty had gotten for him. He was fixated on his clipboard. He was charting stats for the White Buffalo players, but had also started a separate page on Joey Bosworth and another on bad calls against the underdogs. It was evident that over three-quarters of the Stadium was filled with Jesuit High School fans. When Joey Bosworth blindsided the best running back on the White Buffalo team, the booing from the Madras and Warm Springs fans

got drowned out by cheering. The Jesuit coach gave Joey a high-five. Joey Bosworth should have been ejected, yet no flag was thrown. Lilly was one of the booing fans; she drove to the game alone. It was still too painful for her parents to watch the White Buffaloes after the passing of Billy and now Bull. They were teammates and now brothers above.

Unaware that Lilly was in the stands, what Kevin was about to do would only build on the rich boy resentment that she held against him. While the field medics were strapping the star native American running back to the stretcher, Kevin moved next to the coach's side. "I'll give you ten thousand dollars if you let Gus Watt call three plays."

"What?" Coach Gill yelled, drowning out the cheering. A victory was not in sight…

"Just let Gus call three plays! The players respect him, and it would mean a lot to the entire team."

"Did you say ten thousand dollars for three plays?" Coach yelled directly into Kevin's face. Over the past couple of weeks, Coach Gill had built some respect for Kevin, helping the boys to practice and all. When he learned that Kevin was a wealthy Duke College grad from LA, he made his resentment known. What really puzzled Coach Gill was the friendship and bond Kevin had with Gus. The same bond Gus had built with the team in just a few days was mysterious—almost spiritual.

Finally, the crowd was quiet after they loaded the injured Madras player onto a

Cushman. Coach Gill handed his clipboard to Kevin. "Three plays!" Coach Gill followed the small pick-up truck off the field into the stadium tunnel.

The commentator questioned why Joey Bosworth wasn't being ejected. The Portland fans overshadowed the Stadium PA system with rants of "Play Ball." Kevin walked back over to Gus. "Three calls, Mr. Assistant Coach Gus Watt."

Gus flipped a few pages back on his clipboard and then pointed at two of the players. They knew the **Glory Be** play. Now four of the first-string Madras players were sidelined. No matter the outcome for the smaller players, they would be able to say they had played in a State Playoff game. Win or lose didn't matter—they jumped off the bench and ran onto the wet grass and huddled. Gus's chartings had listed Little Running Deer at five feet four and one hundred and eight pounds.

Every football expert in the stands knew that a double reverse play was called when the two fresh running backs lined up on each side of the quarterback. But what they didn't expect was that the smaller player would keep the ball. Joey Bosworth didn't expect it either. Running Deer was small but fast. The White Buffalo were

now on the scoreboard. "Glory be, that little kid can run," rang out from the stadium speakers.

Gus didn't even look up; he was drawing on his clipboard. The extra-point play he called was known to only one other person.

The ball holder did exactly as Gus charted. The moment the football was hiked, he caught it, did a one-eighty, and headed for the far corner of the end zone. Gus instructed the player to make sure the ball's tip crossed the goal line. It did! But the ball popped out when Joey Bosworth made a late, brutal hit. The crowd booed and then yelled! "Fumble… Fumble… Fumble!" After an extra-long discussion, one official extended both hands over his head—the two-point conversion was good.

A Jesuit coach ran out onto the field and got in the face of the officials. After about a minute of name-calling and finger-thumping, the announcer said, "Those farm boys east of the mountains got by with a good trick play." The deep booing turned cold.

Coach Gill returned from the locker room and rushed to Kevin. "What happened?"

"Gus faked a double reverse and then went for the two points," Kevin answered, and in the next breath asked. "How's your player?"

"They're taking Hector to the hospital. That was a bad hit!" Coach Gill answered.

"I know. That player should have been ejected for the late hit." Kevin replied in a serious tone. "If the defense can hold Jesuit to four downs, there's still time."

Coach Gill looked up at the time left on the clock. "How many plays did Gus call?"

"Two! Hopefully, he'll get to call a third play. That was the agreement," Kevin looked hard at Coach Gill, as a warning not to change anything.

The kickoff team was gathered around Gus; he was telling them something, but he wasn't pointing at his clipboard. Coach Gill and Kevin stayed back. An onside kick to a team like Jesuit would be the wrong call.

"Those farm boys from Madras and boys from the Rez look like a herd of cows running onto the field," blared out over the PA system. The words 'herd of cows' were meant to ridicule! The crowd laughed.

There was no onside kick. The Madras defense played hard, but Joey Bosworth broke away for twenty yards on the third down. Jesuit had another first down and could run the clock out by taking a knee on the final set of downs. Joey Bosworth knew the college scouts were watching and wanted to put the icing on the cake. The

weakness that Gus had preached to the players was that a superhero never lets self-pride overcome the ultimate mission.

William Blackbeard was quiet and passive, traits not typically found in a defensive linebacker. But all week, he listened to Gus, and he learned that Joey Bosworth's ego would not let him take a knee. When the ball was snapped, Bosworth spun back and then broke for the open field. Like a flying arrow, William Blackbeard lowered his head, and his helmet hit the target. The football popped out and rolled to the feet of a giant White Buffalo defensive tackle. The huge farm boy from Madras lumbered down the field. Three Jesuit players finally rode him to the ground, but it was after he crossed the goal line.

The crowd was stunned! The State Championship game, which was supposed to be a blowout, was now tied. Coach Gill gathered the team around the bench. They had only made seven extra-point field goals all season. Coach Gill motioned for Gus to come over.

Gus took a knee in the center of all the players and flipped back through all the stats he had charted all weeks and then looked up into all the eyes that were expecting words of encouragement and said, "The chances of making this extra point with a kick are less than ten percent."

Coach Gill stepped back away and started smacking the side of his head with his clipboard. Why he was letting Gus make the most important call of a twenty-plus-year coaching career was making him dizzy-sick. But it was a done deal. Kevin also realized that having Gus call the final play could be a big mistake.

Gus was the only calm, stoic human in the stadium on his knees. He charted out the play and offered up three final words. The extra-point team galloped to the endzone. Most of the fans were yelling and jeering in hopes of causing a false start. Running Deer was on one knee, ready, and signaled for the ball to be hiked. The Jesuit coach told his players to annihilate the ball holder so to win in overtime!

The ball came back, Running Deer jumped up, and then darted for the corner goal line. He was hit so hard that the wind got knocked out of him. The crowd exploded. Running Deer was five yards short of the goal line!

Slowly, an unsettled hush fell over the field. Running Deer had flipped the ball back to the kicker, and the kicker was across the goal line on the opposite side of the field. The field goal kicker had the ball over his head and was dancing. One of the officials had his hand on the flag in his rear pocket. Enough bad calls had already been made.

Gus showed little excitement. There was almost a minute of football left, and it was 16 to 14. There was plenty of time! Jesuit had the best field goal kicker in the state! The White Buffalo

defense, with renewed spirit, kept the Jesuit Crusaders a few yards short of field-goal range. As Gus had coached, the defense knew that Joey Bosworth would keep the ball. He got tackled in the backfield. Three college scouts crossed Bosworth off their recruitment list. His pride cost the whole team.

Most of the fans west of the Cascades, along with the Jesuit alums, quickly exited with their heads downcast. The limited number of east-of-the-Cascades fans were shell-shocked. Lilly stood and watched, feeling mixed emotions. Was this déjà vu of the game Billy and Bull Elk played in? Why was she even here? Volleyball and basketball were games she enjoyed more. She looked for Kevin; he had just unclipped the new Nokia from his belt and was dialing. *He's probably calling his girlfriend to tell her about the game.* Lilly faded in with the crowd headed to the parking lot.

Gus also had mixed feelings as the players hoisted him onto their shoulders. For him, every player on both sides played hard. The pride of just one player affected the outcome of this game. Joey Bosworth let egotism take over his talent and athletic gift—something that impacted every player on the Jesuit team and the fans. Gus prayed for Joey.

The class resentment Coach Gill held toward Kevin was waning. He couldn't live with himself unless he got something off his chest. He waited for Kevin to finish his phone call. "Don't think I let Gus call those plays because of the money you offered me!" Coach Gill yelled over the roar of the fans. "You can take your money and stuff it."

Kevin didn't have time to argue; he had a time commitment to keep. He walked away. After the players put Gus down, Kevin handed him the ear muffs, and they weaseled into the crowd and headed for the rental car.

The parking lot was almost empty by the time the Madras players showered and started loading onto the team bus. Lilly kept her eyes peeled for Kevin.

Coach Gill noticed the orange Saxton's logging truck and walked over. "Lilly Saxton, Billy's older sister, isn't that right?"

"Yeah, that's right," Lilly replied.

"I'm glad you made it to the game. Ever since the climbing accident and now Bull Elk's sudden death, you must be dealing with additional grief. They were best friends on and off the field."

"Yes, they were," Lilly said, then looked out through the bug-splattered windshield. "Where's Kevin Trask? The volunteer who was hauling the Warm Spring boys back and forth to practice."

"He and Gus hurried off. Apparently, Gus helps at Sunday school at his church. Mr. Trask promised he'd have Gus back so that he wouldn't miss church tomorrow. That's what I just learned."

"Oh," Lilly responded, watching more players come out of the stadium and load onto the Madras school bus. "Gus is special. He caught his first fish on the Deschutes with me."

"Yes, Mr. Watt is special." Coach Gill reached for his pocket. "He's great with statistics and allocates the Trask Inc. Charity." Coach Gill pulled the corporate check for $10,000 from his pocket and looked it over again. In the memo section were the words:

Van repairs and steak dinner for White Buffalo football team.

"I don't think that was Gus. I think that was all about Kevin Trask playing Big Shot to build on the Trask legacy. I bet he wants you to put up a plaque in the locker room with his name on it." Lilly rebutted.

"I get the resentment, Lilly," Coach Gill replied and shrugged his shoulders. "I begrudged Mr. Kevin Trask the moment I found out he was a wealthy Californian. But he didn't come off like that."

Lilly quit looking through the windshield and looked at the coach. "FYI, he floated a million-dollar insurance bond for my dad."

"Your dad will probably have to pay him back, plus interest."

"I don't know what the private arrangements are." Lilly shrugged her shoulders. "Did you know that Kevin Trask played on two different basketball teams? He had a scholarship at Gonzaga and then was a walk-on at Duke."

"I didn't know his basketball history until one of my players told me." Coach Gill looked over at the bus filling up with jubilant players.

Lilly paused. *Hum… Come to think about it. Patty was always bragging about Kevin's college days. I don't recall Kevin ever saying he played ball at two top-tier colleges…*

Coach Gill took his eyes off the bus. "I hardly give Mr. Trask the time of day. Near the end of the game today, I thought he was bribing me. I was wrong! It was me judging someone I didn't give a chance. It almost cost us the game." Coach tucked the check back into his pocket.

Lilly closed her eyes. *Maybe if he didn't have a girlfriend or wasn't so much younger or my family wasn't dirt poor…*

"Lilly, it was nice seeing you." Coach Gill looked back at the bus. "The players are going to appreciate a steak dinner over the pizza that the school had budgeted for."

"I bet they will." Lilly mustered a smile of chrome.

"When you talk to Mr. Trask, let him know that we would not be having our victory steak dinner if it were not for Mr. Gus Watt and his clipboard charting."

"I will," replied Lilly, knowing that it was more like if she ever talked to Kevin again. She had burnt that bridge one too many times.

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Kevin and Gus made the last flight. Once they were in the air, Gus quit rocking from front to back. Gus didn't care, or even know, that he was flying first class; all he cared about was making it to church in the morning.

The flight attendant leaned over and asked. "Would you care for a drink?"

"I think I'll have a Cutty Sark on the rocks. We're celebrating a victory." Kevin answered.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Trask. We don't have Cutty in the galley. Would Johnnie Walker Double Black be okay?" The flight attendant had been giving Kevin and Gus special attention since she noticed the nervous rocking. She had an autistic nephew that Gus reminded her of. "And what would you like, Mr. Watt?"

"I would like an orange soda or a root beer. Please," Gus answered.

"I'm sorry, we don't have orange or root beer soda. But we do have orange juice, cranberry juice, tomato juice, and…"

Gus looked out the oval airplane window. It was dark, and too late to drink a breakfast juice. "Do you have hot cocoa?"

"I can do that for you, Mr. Augustine Watt," the flight attendant said and went forward to the galley.

A spark shot off inside Gus's skull; he immediately turned toward Kevin. "How did that woman know my real name?"

"She read it off the flight manifest that has seat numbers and our full legal names. Haven't you noticed that she keeps looking at a clipboard? It is like how you chart information on your clipboard about players."

"Oh," Gus tried to sort things out. "Does she know my birthday, too?"

Now Kevin wondered whether the flight manifest included birthdates. "You can ask her when she comes back."

Gus started to rock in his seat. Since they had his full birth name, it was essential to double-check that all the other information was correct. "My birthday is June sixteen!" Gus blurted out when the flight attendant returned with their drinks.

"Thank you for that information." The flight attendant leaned in over Kevin with the hot cocoa.

"My mother died on my birthday. I was never held by my mother, not like baby Jesus was by Mother Mary." Gus said in a resolute tone.

"I'm so sorry to hear that." The flight attendant knew that her nephew with autism needed order and finality, but she didn't know where the conversation about Gus's mother might lead.

"Gus was a big help in the State High School playoff game today," Kevin said, wanting to change the subject. Almost all the first-class passengers were now tuned in.

"Yep, the White Buffaloes won by two points," Gus said matter-of-factly.

"I didn't know that, Mr. Augustine. Thank you for that."

"Gus, I was wondering what you told the players when the game almost went into overtime?" Kevin asked.

"I told them to trust in God." Gus immediately quipped with certainty.

"Wouldn't they have lost their trust in God if your two-point play hadn't worked?"

"No! That is why I told them to trust in God. The Holy Spirit gets more involved in difficult times."

Chap 34——————A Doxology

Tim was back to selling antivirus protection services, and Kevin was back at Trask Inc. Both had a common goal: making drastic changes to their careers and life paths. Getting into politics had always been a burning desire deep inside Tim. The power and the win-at-all-costs mentality led to a similar result to what he experienced up in Oregon. Mr. Hung Meng was pleased with the way Bull Elk was eliminated—Tim's method of making it look like diabetic shock was praised. What no one knew was that Aiana's body was being unwrapped by talons fifty feet off the trail leading to the summit of Mt. Jefferson.

The burning inside Kevin was far removed from politics and power. It was not to be involved with anything or anyone. Getting rid of Trask trailers and the logging startup operations were the priorities. The way Richard Johnson told him to hang back until the helicopter logging wrapped up pissed Kevin off. He was tired of everyone being worried about him or thinking he couldn't do hard manual work. Kevin had had enough with Lilly always going out of the way to hurt or dig at his rich city boy status. Sell Trask Trailers lock, stock, and barrel, and then head to Bhutan for the hardest trek in the world.

A young, beautiful Bhutanese woman had put on a slideshow at the Mazama Climbing Club Fundraising at Timberline Lodge. Bhutan, a small monarchy in the Eastern Himalayas, claims to be home to the world's highest unclimbed mountain. The last virgin peak, Gangkhar Puensum, lies on the border with China. This sparsely populated part of the world hosts the Snowman Trek—220 miles of hardship, heartbreak, and sometimes the final quest.

Patty knocked on the open door, her notepad in hand, and quietly asked. "Are you ready?"

"I have to go," Kevin said into the phone, then motioned for Patty to come in.

"Kevin, your next meeting with Mr. Hung Meng won't be until after Christmas. He's in the Middle East for three weeks."

"Oh?" Kevin leaned back in the executive chair. "This might be a good time for me to go to Bhutan to get things rolling."

"You must be serious about doing that Snowman Trek?"

"Yep, I'm going to hike it this next fall. I might get some practice on the Pacific Crest Trail this spring. There are trails around the base of Mt. Hood, Mt. Jefferson, and even Mt. Shasta. El Camino de Santiago in Spain is a Trek I have an interest in."

"So, you want to start trekking instead of mountain climbing?"

"I'm not sure. I need to find myself. Nobody understands me. Everyone thinks that I'm this spoiled rich college kid who has it all. I hardly have any true friends. Growing up without a brother or sister was lonely. Never once did I ever have a sleepover with a friend."

Patty wasn't one to be at a loss for words. "Kevin, I'm your friend. We had a sleepover at Shasta Lake on a houseboat."

Kevin chuckled. "That's not what I meant."

"I'll be hurt if you don't consider me a friend." Patty sat down and set the notepad on the edge of the desk. "Haven't you had a couple of sleepovers with Lilly at the A-frame cabin?"

"How do you know about that?" Kevin's face started turning red.

"Girl talk," Patty replied. "Lilly and I have become faithful friends. If CP and I ever have children, we'd want Lilly to be a godparent."

"Did Lilly say anything else?"

"Yeah, she said you're not a good aim." Patty smiled.

Kevin's face was now hot and his mouth dry. "That was all that she told you?"

"Yeah, that was pretty much it," Patty answered.

"Patty, that night we slept on the deck of the Stargazer houseboat, what did you think about me? Be honest, just like a good friend would be."

"Ah… Well, I thought you were handsome and debonair, and…" Patty hesitated.

"Did you think about me being wealthy and privileged?"

"I knew you were a part of Trask Inc., but that didn't matter. I was upset with Stan, and I wanted to hurt him."

"So, you would have had sex with me to hurt Stan?"

Patty was feeling pinned down and ashamed. "Ah… A, yes. I wanted to be with you that night… But there was more to it than me wanting to hurt someone."

"How so?"

"There was the alcohol, the loss of my sister, not having many friends, not really being part of that group up there at the lake, and so much more."

"What about getting pregnant?" Kevin asked.

"I was taking the pill."

"Oh?" Kevin replied. "So, you're not taking the pill?"

"Yes, that's correct. We want to start a family, God willing. After Trask Inc is sold, I'm sure Mr. Hung Meng will have his own people to bring on board."

Kevin paused and leaned back in the executive chair. The ramification of all the managers being let go was one thing he'd never thought about. *Grandpa Trask must be rolling over in the grave.* Kevin leaned forward and caringly said. "Let's go over the list."

A nice surprise on Patty's recap list was that Trask Inc was producing more units than ever, since using imported wiring harnesses from China. On the downside, the union officials demanded a recount of the decertification vote and threatened to sue and seek a hefty cost-of-living increase.

Kevin pondered the pay hike for at least an hour before he got up from his desk to see Condi. It was both refreshing and strange to go into Robert's office and see a woman behind the big, ornate wooden desk. "What's on your mind?" Condi asked.

"This seven percent pay hike, is it enough? It looks like we're setting new profit records." Kevin took a chair in front of the desk. "Could we afford to give the workers more, something like ten percent?"

"Maybe, we could afford it this quarter, but trailer sales slowdown during the winter," Condi said with a firm voice and a stern look. "I've been over the numbers and made some projections, and seven percent is what I came up with!"

"But, if we hike up the pay now, then when Mr. Hung Meng takes over, he won't be able to roll back wages," Kevin rebutted.

"Kevin, when Mr. Hung Meng takes over, he can do whatever he wants. I'm betting he outsources the manufacturing. It looks to me like he's interested in converting the property into a storage house for watercraft."

"Why would he do that? Trask Inc is making an eighteen percent profit using the **EBITDA** accounting formula."

"I didn't know you understood the **EBITDA** accounting formula." Condi quizzed Kevin.

"Sure, I do!" Kevin replied defensively. "It is net income with interest, taxes, depreciation, and amortization added back to our profit statement. Or something like that, Patty has been explaining it to me."

Condi frowned. "Kevin, let's stick with the seven percent pay raise, and let's hope that Mr. Hung Meng wants to stay in the trailer manufacturing business."

For the second time, it felt as though Grandpa Trask was rolling over in his grave. Kevin stopped at Condi's old desk. "Patty, after lunch, could you come upstairs? I need your thoughts about something."

"Kevin, could I come up after quitting time. I need to get payroll out, and I have an accident report that has to be faxed before quitting time today."

"Sure, no problem." Kevin quietly replied. "Would you like me to bring back lunch for you?"

"That would be great! Condi and I have a meeting at one thirty." Patty took some invoices over to the copy machine and started making copies.

Kevin didn't go up the stairs; he went down one floor and pushed open the heavy metal doors that opened to the manufacturing plant. A few workers nodded or waved; a few more fist-bumped as they hurried by. Everyone was busy and had a task at hand. Kevin meandered down one side and then up the other side of the U-shaped assembly line. *Mr. Meng would never shut down the plant*, Kevin rationalized as he looked out an open shipping door into the employee parking lot.

Even Gus was too busy to talk; he was checking under a delivery truck with the Y2K inspection mirror. Kevin drove down Navy Way Road, ten feet above the saltwater tunnel that Mr. Meng needed to complete the Chinese Communist Party's turn of the century mission.

The knot in Kevin's head migrated to his stomach; he didn't feel like eating anything, but should have. He took a stool at the bar, ordered a double shot, and two lunches to go.

Why is all this stuff being laid on me? All this Trask family stuff is like a noose around my neck. My entire life has been on a school schedule. My parents are finally going to retire. I don't want to work for thirty years before I go on a road trip. I can't deal with all of this right now. After Christmas, I'm going to see if Tina is serious about being my trekking partner to explore the world…

The bartender put some chips and salsa in front of Kevin with another double shot of Cutty Sark. Kevin's personal pity-party got interrupted. "Sir, your two lunches are ready." The bartender put two brown bags on the bar.

"I'll have another double shot." Kevin continued to ponder.

I'm not responsible for anybody but myself. Whatever happens to the plant is not on me. All this decision-making over the past six months is draining me! I need my space away from California, especially Long Beach.

Kevin gulped the double Cutty Sark, put fifty dollars on the bar, and left with Condie and Patty's lunch.

"Hey, drive responsibly, Mr. Trask," the bartender yelled as Kevin steadied himself at the bar's exit to the parking lot.

Gus lifted, then motioned for Kevin to pull through the gate. Kevin stopped the Range Rover at the security shack. "Gus, have

you been thinking about moving? Maybe after Christmas would be a good time?"

"Yes, sir, Mr. Kevin Trask." Gus noticed the alcohol on Kevin's breath. "Are you celebrating like when we were on the airplane?" Gus asked.

"No, Gus. I have a lot on my mind. What I'm about to do could make a difference to a whole lot of people here at the plant."

"Oh, are you looking over my plans for the remodel of the old Navy training room?"

"What plans? What remodel? What are you talking about?" Kevin pounded his fist on the steering wheel in frustration. More work stuff that he wasn't aware of… The six shots on an empty stomach were bringing out a foul side of Kevin.

"The plans in the red binder that I gave to you," Gus ruefully replied.

"No, Gus! It is not about any plans that you gave me. It's about the workers and their families!" Kevin looked straight through the windshield at the cinder block plant that now seemed to be moving. "Gus, I'll always be known as the spoiled rich kid that didn't care!" The rear tires on the Range Rover squealed as Kevin blasted off and parked under the basketball hoop. It was difficult walking into the building without staggering. A few workers were watching from the dock and got a bad vibe.

Kevin set the two brown bags on the half-circle counter, hiccupped, and then said. "I bought a lunch for Condi too."

"She'll appreciate that, she's still on a conference call." Patty went back to faxing important documents.

Kevin didn't attempt the stairs two at a time; he used the railing to steady himself. Alone on the top floor, he stood at the one-way glass window and watched all the workers in the plant below. The lunch whistle blew, and the assembly line stopped. Kevin never thought that selling off Trask Inc would have such life-changing consequences for so many people. *It feels like my head is going to explode. I get why people think about using a bullet or jumping… I didn't ask for any of this. I want to climb my own mountain—not stand on one already conquered by others…*

Kevin's drunken, depressed, self-consuming, dark mental state was halted by the desk phone. "Hello, Kevin here."

"Mr. Trask, this is Officer Anthony Crowfoot from Warm Springs. I want to ask you a few questions."

Kevin was pulled out of his dark place when he was informed about how Shrimp spotted a blue tarp from the logging helicopter. The body of Aiana was tied and wrapped in the blue tarp. Officer Crowfoot was careful not to give the details that she had been shot in the chest and also between her legs. The body was about fifty yards from the yellow gate that Bull Elk had taken him to, where

Bull showed him brown rubbings of where Deer or Elk were trying to shed antlers.

What Kevin didn't know was that he was a prime suspect. Kevin had no plans to return to Oregon. He gave the officer as much information as he could recall. Officer Crowfoot filled out the blank lines on a subpoena when the call ended.

> **OPEN MURDER CASE # 12031999 First contacted suspect on Dec 12 @ 12:10 pm. Mr. Kevin Trask seemed evasive; his words were slurred. He repeated himself several times. The suspect refused to come up to Oregon to give a detailed statement or be fingerprinted. The conversation felt deceptive.**

Kevin leaned back against the headrest; it felt like the room was moving. He pulled the lever on the side of the chair to lay the chair flat. Now the ceiling was spinning! Trask Inc was smothering him like the heavy lead X-ray blanket that dentists put over your chest. He'd never achieved anything on his own—everything was either given or laid at his feet. Good looks, good health, fame on the basketball court, all gifts that Kevin took for granted until Lilly berated wealth and the elite. The world will always ponder why Marilyn Monroe, Ernest Hemingway, Jimi Hendrix, and so many more gifted or privileged souls chose an early exit. Often, the word 'accidental' will be listed as the cause of death to lessen the stigma of a suicide. Truth be told, mental torment cannot be seen. The pain of a broken arm can be fixed—unlike the aching of a broken heart.

Patty had to pound on the door casing to get Kevin's attention!

Kevin sat up, rubbed his eyes, and unlatched the chair's back. "I must have dozed off."

Patty held out a package. "You got something from Notre Dame."

"Thanks." Kevin took the package and could feel bubble wrap inside.

"Patty, since our talk this morning, as close friends, I'd like to run something personal by you." Kevin wiped away the dry slobber and second-guessed how he should phrase his question.

Patty sat in the chair in front of the desk and sensed that she was about to be put on the spot. "Kevin, just tell me what's on your mind."

"So, would you sleep with a guy if your parents were in the next room?"

Now Patty took a double thought. *Lilly mentioned that she and Kevin had fallen asleep in a bunk upstairs and, more recently, on a deck.*

"Well, I guess it depends on the circumstances."

Kevin rubbed his forehead and tried to find better words. "You wouldn't be married; you would be single."

"Would I really like this guy who is at my parents' house?" Patty asked.

"Yeah, I guess. And her parents are in the next room. Wouldn't you think that was wrong or weird?"

"Are we going to have sex?" Patty asked.

"Yeah, I think so. Or maybe just fooling around."

Patty was getting lost in the conversation. "There's a big difference between the two."

"Okay, let's say you are going all the way. The point is, her parents are there and fully know what is happening."

"Kevin, it sounds a little awkward, but I'm going to be truthful. I was having fun with a boy at my parents' home when they were gone. But my grandma, who lives with us, heard us fooling around and having way too much fun."

"Wow, did your grandma ever say anything or tell anyone?"

"No, my grandma never said a word." A big smile came to Patty's face.

"What's so funny?" Kevin asked.

"Nana did take my bedroom door off its hinges and put it out in the storage shed."

Kevin laughed. "If you and CP have a little girl, you'd better remember that story."

"CP knows the story, and he will do just like Nana did. CP thinks it's some old Chinese chaste practice for teaching children respect."

"That's funny!" Kevin was wiping tears from his face. "I'll pray you have a boy."

"Why the double standard?" Patty quizzed Kevin with a scowl. "Boys need to know and show respect also."

"You're right. That life lesson would work for boys, too."

"Well, CP wants at least four kids, so the door removal lesson will probably happen more than once." Patty's scowl turned worrisome.

Kevin felt a small tug on his heart. He always wished that he had at least one sibling. "So, are you good at having that many children?"

"God willing," Patty said, trusting God's plan no matter what. "I need to get back downstairs and make sure a fax went through."

"Thanks, Patty, your door story helps me with a sleepover decision."

"One last thing." Patty stood up and ran her hands down her skirt. "Gus is going to be calling you on his new cell phone, walkie-talkie. He's been up here twice, and you were sleeping."

"More like passed out," Kevin said under his breath and picked up the package from Notre Dame as Patty exited.

Inside was a receipt for the SL 600 donation. The car sold for $144,000 at the Harper Research fundraiser. Coach Mike McCall included a heartfelt thank-you card and an invitation to coach the women's basketball at Notre Dame. In a smaller envelope was a necklace they had found under the passenger seat. Kevin tossed the diamond necklace into the center top drawer of his desk, then went to the window overlooking the front parking lot. Gus was patrolling on the three-wheeler. He slithered down the stairs and into the employee lunch room and stood before the wall of glass food dispensers—no *wonder I never come in here. Not much of this stuff can be healthy…*

With a bag of chips, freeze-dried jerky, and diet soda in his hands, Kevin hoped Patty would have some antacid. On the stairs, he heard the Nokia ringing from his office. *I don't want to talk with Gus right now.* Kevin did an about-face and recalled a place he used to hide as a kid.

Out back of the plant, Kevin found refuge among the stacks of steel, retired welding equipment, and metal-bending jigs. There were three rows of prototype trailers that never made it onto a sales floor. A newer row with wiring problems was where Kevin ducked into for a makeshift hideout. After the quitting whistle blasted, he waited twenty minutes for the parking lot to empty before going back inside. At the top of the stairs, he spotted the dark blue uniform pants with a light contrasting seam strip. Kevin froze!

"Mr. Kevin Trask, your new cell phone must not be working." Gus's voice echoed down the stairwell.

Crap, he found me, Kevin thought, coming up the stairs. "Gus, I need to go home; my head hurts."

"Is that because of the alcohol you had at lunch?" Gus asked as Kevin went into the office.

"No! It's because a lot of trailers out back are not inventory tagged."

"That can't be. I have counted every trailer that leaves the manufacturing yard plant."

"What about the ones that get returned? How are they accounted for?"

There was dead silence. Gus started rocking and canting, then pulled a string of beads from his pocket. "Just like my Rosary, Mr. Kevin Trask. There are no beads for all the prayers. Somebody took the Glory Be prayer beads away."

Kevin had taken World Religions 101 his first year at Gonzaga and learned that prayer beads are used by Muslims, Christians, Hindus, Buddhists, Sikhs, the Bahá'í faith, and other religions to mark repetitive prayers. "Gus, I don't know anything about that, and I really need to go."

"Okay, Mr. Kevin Trask." Kevin started to pull the office door shut.

Gus stepped out into the hallway. "If you can find out who took the GB beads away, I can move out of my apartment. My head will stop hurting if I know."

"Okay, Gus, I'll find out." Kevin hurried down the stairs, repeating GBB, GBB, GBB, so as not to forget.

Even with his parents in Mexico, Kevin chose to stay above the six-car garage. Marie still came by, cleaned, got the mail, made him breakfast, packed a lunch, and cooked dinner with instructions for Kevin. Within forty-five minutes in the main house, towels would be left on the floor, newspapers spread all over, and an empty beer bottle or two, or popcorn husks, sometimes cluttered the entertainment room. More than once, Kevin would leave the eighty-inch projection television or surround sound system on. Digging the remote controls out from the seat cushions was a daily ritual. Marie had less to clean up when Kevin went directly to the apartment above the garage.

When Kevin busted into the kitchen, the herb-blackened salmon on brown rice was still warm on the marble counter. The mail was underneath a note that read:

There is a salad in the refrigerator next to your lunch.

A few pieces of junk mail fell on the tile floor along with a wine bottle cork. The salmon and rice filled the void left by the chips and jerky from the vending machine. Looking over the rim of the wine glass, Kevin saw a message on the whiteboard next to the wall phone.

Tina Williams called. She said that your new cell phone must not be working.

Kevin reached for the phone clipped to his belt. *That's right, I turned my phone off so Gus couldn't get a hold of me…* Kevin turned the phone back on, and the display indicated: **5 missed calls**. He hit **#8** to dial the sender.

Sue answered, "Hello."

"Sue, is Tina there?"

"Yeah, she's here. Hold on for a minute." Sue set the phone on the laminate countertop.

"Like, Kevin, what did you decide? Are we going to do Christmas Eve at my parents' house?"

"Yeah," I guess. Kevin replied with hesitation. "It just seems weird with your parents going to be there and all."

"Like, why does it feel weird? Christmas is all about family. On Christmas Day this year, we got reservations at **Tony's Fish Grotto**. The day after, my mom and I took back a lot of the stuff Tom got us. Then we really score big on the sales. It's a tradition for our family."

"I'm not big on shopping," Kevin said while pouring another glass of wine.

"You can watch adult movies with my stepfather. Like, that's his thing to do when he's all by himself. Tom's not that big a shopper either unless it's for lingerie."

Now things were really feeling weird. "I might pass on the Christmas Invitation."

Tina needed to play the Jealousy card. "Like, what did Tim say about you paying back the money. Remember, six thousand of it was mine."

"He's good if I give him fifteen thousand in cash to square things up between you two. Then he said he'll be out of our lives. I'm going to meet up with him this week."

"That's great, Kevin. I'll pay you back. Like, this new position with the Red Cross pays so well."

"That's good. I'll call you after Tim and our meeting. I might pass on Christmas Eve."

"Kevin, do you always want to be known as the team prude?" Tina turned on her canned sensual voice. "I can't wait to show you how much I appreciate all the stuff you're doing for me."

"We'll talk later. If my parents are still gone, maybe you can come up here for Christmas?" Kevin suggested.

"That would hurt my mom's feelings. Christmas is special to her."

"Maybe I can find a motel close by to your parents' home."

"That might work. I really want to make love to you. Bye, Kevin," *Click*

Kevin hung up and walked over to the double-door Sub-Zero refrigerator. Marie always had a special treat waiting for him. The strawberry cheesecake was at eye level. He knew better than to take a piece of cheesecake into the study with shelves and shelves of collectible books. The Trask home library had its own Dewey Decimal System and was Grampa's pride and joy. Kevin hoped to find something about the history of the rosary in one of the three sets of encyclopedias. After two hours of reading and searching, all Kevin knew was that the Glory Be was not a prayer; it was a doxology.

Could Gus be playing me so as not to move to a new apartment? Kevin left the books stacked on the antique desk and

one encyclopedia open on a reading stand. Marie knew the Dewey Decimal system and would always make sure every book was back in its place. Kevin would often shelve a book with the title reading from bottom to top and the pages dog-eared. He had free rein over most of the Trask manor except the study.

In the morning, Kevin waited for Marie to come through the wrought iron gate. He rolled down the window on the Range Rover. "Marie, I was in the study last night looking through books. If you can straighten up and…"

"Not a problem, I'll put everything back," Marie replied and then drove toward the main house.

At the gate, Kevin stopped and took a side-to-side look over the ten acres the mansion sat on. *I've never wanted to drive out one gate only to enter another gate for my life's career. I need to find something I'm passionate about. Once the Trask Inc deal is done, Tina and I will be a committed couple, trekking around the world together…*

"Good morning, Gus," Kevin said at the second gate.

"Mr. Kevin Trask. I'm glad we made our agreement last night," Gus said with an expectation that Kevin had an answer. Nobody at Holy Family Catholic School ever gave him a definitive answer. It was probably a nun who put Gus onto the rosary bead quest as a way to keep him busy or distracted.

"Gus, the 'Glory Be' is not a prayer, it's a doxology." Kevin waited for Gus's reaction to the word doxology. There was none.

"So I guess we can make plans to get you moved."

"No, Mr. Kevin. It is only a doxology if the words are sung. 'Praise God, from whom all blessings flow; Praise Him, all creatures here below' is a doxology we sing in Sunday School."

"We'll talk later." Kevin sped off. He knew someone at Notre Dame who could answer his question about the five missing beads on a Rosary.

At the top of the first set of stairs, Kevin stopped. Down the hall, he could see that the two doors to Robert's office were closed.

"Condi's on a conference call with the union," Patty said as she came out of the supply room. "They want a second desertification vote. I think she is pushing that vote out until next summer."

Kevin took three reams of paper from Patty. "That's a smart move. Hung Meng can deal with the union then."

"One more reason for Mr. Hung Meng to close down the plant," Patty whispered. "Rumors about the pending sale and closing the plant have increased production numbers. A Union desertification vote might help to show that American workers would be better than outsourcing."

"We need to squelch those rumors. Loose lips sink ships." Kevin whispered back and set the reams of paper on top of the copy machine.

"Thanks," Patty pulled out the paper tray from the copier.

"Oh, by the way, I took your advice!" Kevin said in an upbeat tone. "I'm going to do a Christmas stayover."

"What?" Patty exclaimed with misperception. She was secretly working on a stayover for Ruth at the Saxtons' cabin. It was going to be a surprise for Richard Johnson. Kevin was also part of the plan.

"Remember when you told me about your grandma taking your door off the hinges?"

Patty frowned. "Yes… I remember."

"Well, I hope that Tina doesn't have a grandma like yours."

"I thought Tina was back with Tim?"

"No, she and Tim were never a thing. She was only working for him. That didn't work out. I'm going to her parents' for Christmas."

"Oh!" Patty was shocked; her plans had just blown up.

Kevin looked over at the closed doors to his dad's office. "Could you send Condi up when she has some time?" He hit the stairs two at a time. On his desk, he picked up the tax donation form from Notre Dame and dialed the phone number.

"Hello, Coach McCall here."

"Coach, Kevin Trask here. Do you know why there are five missing beads on a Rosary?"

Coach McCall moved the phone to his other ear to hear better. His cinder-block office was located between the locker rooms and the gymnasium.

"What?" Coach McCall blurted.

"The **Glory Be** prayer," Kevin said. "It's a doxology, and there are no beads on a Rosary for it."

"Okay, so what can I do about that?" Coach McCall was totally lost.

"I just need to explain to a friend why there are no beads for when he says his rosary."

"Kevin, you're asking the wrong person. I'm not catholic. But I know a professor here at the college who's also a priest and will know. I'll get back to you."

"Thanks, Coach."

"No, thank you, Kevin! Your sports car, which we auctioned off, is going to do a lot of good for cancer research."

"What did you do with the bag cell phone?"

"I had the engineering department pull it out of the car, just like you said to do."

"Coach, could I get one more favor. Could you ask the engineering department to check that bag phone for a tracking device?"

"What's all this spy and doxology stuff all about?" Coach McCall asked.

"I'll have to tell you later. I have someone standing at my office door."

"Okay, we'll talk later." Both men hung up at the same time.

"Come on in, Condi." Kevin stood and motioned with his arm.

"I haven't been up here since my father was terminated." Condi did a 360-degree scan of the office. "It looks a lot more cluttered."

"Probably is, I'm not that organized. Now, with Patty downstairs, there's no one to help pick and straighten stuff up. By the way, how are you and Patty doing working together?"

"She's great! But I wished she'd stay out of my family business."

"What do you mean?"

Oh, she and that Lilly logger woman are planning some secret rendezvous for my mom and Dad over Christmas.

"You don't want your mom and Dad to get back together?"

"No! My father is a racist and a cheater."

"Condi, I've talked with Richard, and he said nothing happened in the motel room. All he remembered was sirens and birds out on the deck in the morning."

"He's still a racist! He's never acknowledged his own grandson, just because Ali is half white." The veins on Condi's temples were bulging.

"I get it, Condi. I won't meddle in your family business." Kevin took a deep breath and then sat. "Is Ali's father a Muslim? I don't think Richard is racist."

Condi gave Kevin the F-off look.

Kiven was done asking any more questions about the family. "I'm going to need sixteen thousand dollars in cash next week?"

"What for?"

"Tina lost some money on a deal gone bad. Now they want it all back in cash. I'm having Christmas at her family's place in San Diego."

"Kevin, you can't withdraw more than ten thousand dollars in cash without filing a CTR; that's a currency transaction report. Paying off someone's personal loan debt is probably not a legitimate business expense. You're getting into a real grey area."

"How do you suggest I round up the money?"

"Take in advance on your salary account. In fact, you should give yourself a raise. I'm earning more than you since Robert doubled my pay to stay on until Trask Inc is sold."

"Do I really deserve a raise? You and Patty run everything around here."

"Kevin, I got a conference call in a few minutes. Give Patty the payoff information. I'll advance the funds to your account. Then you'll have to go to the bank to draw out cash."

"Thanks, Condi, I know you will always do what's right for the company."

"Not a problem, and thanks for your vote of confidence."

"One last question, how is Ali doing?"

"Ali's doing good. Gus has been a big help and a role model when I work late. Gus is teaching Ali how to read."

"I bet it's all superhero stuff."

"Yeah, but Gus also reads out of a children's bible to Ali. The nights that I work late, they ride around the parking lot when it's empty. Gus got Ali one of those big wheel things, sort of like his trike."

"I hope you don't work late every night?" Kevin asked with sincerity.

"I work until the work is done. That's what I'm paid to do." Condi replied inflexibly.

"You sound a lot like your father."

"My Dad doesn't think women should be allowed in the workplace at all!"

"Richard is old school. He didn't think I should be working at the helicopter loading zone because I'm not a safety-first worker."

"Kevin, that's because you're a blunderbuss and reckless. You need to take life more seriously. All that mounting climbing stuff to rest."

"I'm going to check out trekking, not climbing mountains, this next year."

"Good to know you are getting off the finding yourself Do or Die BS. A hard day's work for the good of mankind is what you will be measured by."

"Now you sound like Grandpa Trask."

"Donald was old school. I respected his work ethic and honesty."

"Well, Grandpa Trask would say not to hold a grudge and that you should cut your dad some slack. It was family first with Grandpa."

Condi frowned and headed for the door. "Get Patty the payout information, and I'll take care of it."

Kevin went to the window overlooking the front parking lot. Gus was riding up and down the rows of parked cars, and then he vanished around the corner of the building to patrol the back lot. *Gus will like it when he has a new condo and no longer has to*

work… Kevin lied to himself. *Now that he's out back, I can leave undetected. I need to get Tina a Christmas present.*

The gemologist offered Kevin a glass of wine after he laid out three different bracelets. "Any of these would make a wonderful Christmas present."

"I'm not sure. My girlfriend is really picky." Kevin took a drink of wine. "Tina knows what's in or out of style."

"What about diamond earrings? They never go out of style."

"Would she be able to bring them back if she didn't like them?"

"Yes, there would be a ten percent restocking or exchange fee. We could apply that fee to an engagement ring in the future. Our goal is to make our customers happy, so they keep coming back," the owner rambled on as he poured more wine.

Kevin drank the entire glass while the gemologist ran a credit check and found out that he had a Trask heir in his private showroom. The restocking or exchange fee was waived, and Kevin left with two different bracelets and a pair of diamond earrings, with just a signature. Being a Trask had perks that Kevin wasn't even aware of—most anyone else would have had to leave the title to their car or sign over a home.

A late lunch with margaritas was next. Kevin was becoming a regular at the Mexican restaurant at the SW corner of Navy Way, overlooking the entrance to Long Beach Harbor. The supertankers seemed bigger these days than when he'd ride his bike down the gravel road built on top of the jetty. Way back then, Grandpa Trask trusted Gus as though he were the big brother to watch over Kevin and harbor ship traffic.

Patty was getting accustomed to Kevin's late lunches, the office chair reclined, hands tucked under his belt, with a wide-open mouth sight. She knocked hard on the open office door.

Kevin reeled forward in the executive chair. "Is it that time already?"

"Yes, it's almost five, and the only thing on your list this afternoon is the information for the cash payment you asked Condi to handle."

"Here I wrote everything down." Kevin tore off the top sheet of a notepad, folded it, and held it out.

Patty took the folded paper. "I'll go drop this off for Condi before I leave for the night." Patty turned and headed for the door.

"What's the rush?" Kevin opened the top center drawer on the desk. "I'd like a woman's opinion on something." Kevin took out three jewelry boxes and then opened them one at a time.

"Wow, those bracelets are so eloquent, and those earrings are over the top." Patty bent over to get a better look. "What are these, a caret each?"

I don’t know. But which of the three do you think Tina will like most for Christmas?

Patty straightened up. “You and Tina must be getting serious.”

“I like the red rubies on this bracelet.” Kevin pointed at a black velvet box. “But the white pearls would look good against Tina’s dark tan.” Kevin picked up the pearl bracelet and laid it on the cuff of his dark blue dress shirt.

“I’d do the earrings. Diamonds are a girl’s best friend,” Patty sarcastically quipped and then headed for the door.

“Thanks!” Kevin picked up the smaller box and put it in the desk drawer next to Mr. Meng's million-dollar diamond necklace.

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The quitting-time whistle blasted just as Patty knocked and then pushed open one of the heavy wooden doors and entered the large office.

“Did you get the contact information for the bank payout?” Condi asked.

“Yeah.” Patty tossed the folded paper on Condi’s desk.

“What’s the matter?” Condi asked.

“Oh… Nothing!”

“Something is bugging you. I could tell this morning after you and Kevin talked.”

“It’s Kevin’s girlfriend. I can’t stand her, and it looks like they’re getting back together.”

“You mean Tina? The girl he dated during college. She attended Pepperdine.”

“Yeah, that bitch! She thinks she’s a goddess.”

“Well, she sure looks like a goddess.” Condi gave Patty a serious look. “Over the years, when she’d get the chance, she strutted her stuff out in the plant. She could bring the whole assembly line to a halt.”

“That’s her for sure, Hot-Shit Tina.”

“Patty, you shouldn’t stick your nose into other people’s private lives, just like this thing you are doing up in Oregon, trying to get my mom and dad back together. That stuff always backfires and nobody likes it,” Condi said as a stern warning.

This was the first time leaving work that Patty didn’t care about working at Trask Inc. Hopefully, she’d be pregnant by next summer, in unison with the sale of Trask Inc.

Kevin was at the guard shack, pointing at beads on a rosary with Gus. They both looked up, and Gus said, “Mrs. Patty Johnson, the bus won’t be here for…” Gus looked at his watch and then completed his words, “For eighteen minutes.”

“I can give you a ride home.” Kevin offered.

"No thanks, I need some prayer time—"

Chap 35——————Happy Holidays

The blow-up snowman and Santa's sleigh seemed out of place for a sixty-five-degree day in San Diego. Kevin didn't take note of all the holiday yard decorations before Tina came running down the walkway and threw her arms around him. Kevin hugged her back, lifted her, spun her around, and said, "It's so good to be back together."

There was an immediate moan, and Tina gently twisted out of Kevin's arms. "Sorry, Kevin, but my chest really hurts." Tina stood on her toes, carefully leaned forward, and kissed Kevin on the cheek. "Like, did you bring your stuff?"

"Yeah, it's in the Range Rover." Kevin pointed toward the street.

"Like, where's your Mercedes?"

"Didn't I tell you? I donated the SL600 to a cancer fundraiser."

"Oh…" Tina was now staring toward the street. "Like, you're not planning to drive that family van all the time, are you?"

"It's a great rig for driving on forest roads to find places to go trekking."

"Hey, big guy!" rang out loud enough for the neighbors to hear. Tom grabbed Kevin's hand and gave it a firm handshake. "Did Tina tell you about her boob job gone wrong? We're not sure if we're going to join the class action lawsuit or hire our own attorney."

"No, we haven't talked about that," Kevin replied.

"Seems that plastic surgeon friend of ours used silicone-filled instead of saline-filled implants. Come on in, and I'll fill you in on what's going on." Tom put his arm over Kevin's shoulder and pushed Kevin toward the porch.

Kevin twisted out of Tom's smothering hold and said. "Merry Christmas and Happy New Year."

"And it's going to be one hell of a good new year for us," Tom boasted.

"Why's that?" Kevin asked, hoping to change the subject away from implant surgery.

"Well, my team at Hyduee Pharmaceutical just got the FDA to approve a new painkiller. Oxycodone is going to put me on the who's who list down here in San Diego."

"Happy Holidays," Nancy said with a martini in her hand. "Can I get you something to drink?"

"Yeah, sure," Kevin answered in a distracted voice. "Cutty Sark on the rocks."

"Hey, big guy, we don't have that rich man's whiskey! But I have some Crown Royal." Tom squeezed behind the small bar with four chrome barstools in front. "Have a seat over here so we can drink to the San Diego Chargers. It looks like they're going to the Super Bowl." Tom said as he poured two drinks.

Kevin straddled a stool and noticed several sample packets of Oxycodone on top of the bar. "I don't think that the Chargers have a chance in hell." Kevin picked up one of the foil packets and noticed that two pills had been punched out. "The 49ers would be my bet in the Super Bowl. Steve Young is on fire!"

"You want to make a bet, big guy?" Tom asked.

"I'm not that much of a gambler," Kevin said, setting the Oxycodone sampler packet back on the bar.

"Well, if you think that the Niners can do it, why not put your money where your mouth is?" Tom said in the forceful salesman tone that he was known for.

"Actually, I'm not interested in either team. Since the Rams left LA, I don't have a team."

"You place a bet to win money. Bet the spread if you want a certain team to win."

"I don't need the money," Kevin said.

"Why don't we open presents?" Tina suggested from the hallway.

"Sounds okay to me," Nancy said from the couch.

"I'll go get my stuff," Kevin said and eagerly headed for the front door. While he dug in the glove box for the diamond earrings, he saw a callback number on the cell phone and hit redial. "CP, what's up?"

"Hey, Bro, how's Christmas Eve going for you?"

"Seems good so far. I'm at Tina's place, and we're just going to open presents."

"Sounds cool. Patty said you got her some huge diamonds."

"Yeah, I have them right here in my hand."

"Cool, hope she likes them." There was an uncomfortable pause.

"So, that's what you called for, to see how Christmas Eve is going?"

"No, I called because Patty is feeling down and all."

"About what?"

"She and Lilly were trying to get Uncle Rich and Aunt Ruth back together, and the whole thing just blew up."

"What do you mean, blew up?"

"Well, the airlines canceled some flights since there's an ice storm headed for Portland."

"Welcome to traveling during Christmas break. That happened to me a couple of times trying to get home from college."

"That's why I'm calling. I already know the answer, but I'm doing this for the wife. Patty said you guys had a private pilot on retainer." Another uncomfortable pause, then CP continued. "Patty wanted to know how much it would be to fly Aunt Ruth up to Oregon."

Kevin paused to contemplate… *That explains why Patty hardly talked to me when I showed her Tina's presents and was helping Gus understand a Doxology.*

"CP, give Condi a call and tell her it's okay with me to set up a flight. There's that airport in Redmond that gets snow but hardly ever ice."

"Cousin Condi won't have anything to do with trying to get her mom and dad back together."

"I forgot about that. Condie's pretty much done with Richard." Kevin agreed.

"Kevin, we're opening presents!" Tina yelled from the porch.

"CP, I'd try to arrange a flight, but being Christmas in all, I doubt that it would do any good anyway."

"I hear ya, bro. I told Patty that I'd shoot a call to you."

"Sorry, I hope this doesn't ruin your Christmas."

"No, I'll invite Auntie Ruth over, and we'll be fine. Have a Merry Christmas. Hey, bro, Patty's been praying for you."

"Okay…" Kevin followed up with, "Merry Christmas to you and your family." He shut off the Nokia and put it in the glove box, not wanting any interruption on this special night. The prayer comment was unsettling—

"Come on, Kevin, my parents are waiting," Yelled Tina from halfway down the walkway.

Kevin put the cell phone back in the glovebox, grabbed his overnight and garment bag from the back seat.

"Who was that?" Tina asked as Kevin shut the door.

"A guy who helped set up the helicopter logging operation."

"I thought they didn't want you working around the helicopter."

"Yeah, sort of. Let's go in. Here's your present."

Tina looked at the small wrapped box and immediately thought, *engagement ring*.

"How about another drink when we open presents?" Tom asked when they came through the front door and then pointed. "You can take your bags down to Tina's room."

Tina was showing Nancy the small professionally wrapped box when Kevin came back into the front room. "Go ahead and open it now," Nancy bellowed.

Tina untied the silver ribbon and then unwrapped the silver gift wrap. She held her breath and lifted the hinged lid, her eyes locked on the diamonds. Nancy grabbed the lavish box from Tina's hand. "Oh, my God! Look at the size of those rocks."

"Ah… like thanks," Tina said and pecked Kevin on the cheek.

"If you don't like them. You can return them for something else."

"Like, it's just that diamond solitaires are more for old ladies."

"Watch your mouth, young lady. I'd wear these all the time. They show class." Nancy was clutching the box as though the diamond earrings were hers.

"Well, let's open the rest of the gifts!" Tom injected into the stagnant air.

The gift-opening was a William's family ritual, where a pile was made of things to keep and things to take back. Tom's lingerie shopping paid off. The stuff he bought for both women went into the keep pile. Tom got the new golf clubs that he had been hinting at for the past six months. Tina got Kevin a personalized money clip with a matching key holder featuring a gold-plated Mercedes emblem. The Trask family never took anything back, but this might be a first for Kevin.

After another round of drinks, Tom was hinting that Tina model the new lingerie. Nancy slurred out, for the third time, that they all should go into the hot tub. Even Tina felt uncomfortable with that suggestion; she grabbed Kevin's hand. "We're going to bed. Good night."

Tina's room was in the middle of the hallway. She was the only one who had limited her alcohol consumption. Kevin flopped backward on the bed. Tina undid his belt, and then he arched upward so she could pull off his slacks. He was having second thoughts, but the three Crown Royals pushed out the weirdness of her parents being home. When Tina stripped in front of him, there was no turning back—he was past the point of reason.

"You can't rub my boobs!"

"Why?" Kevin sat up and felt a rush of wooziness.

"My implants could be leaking. The doctor squeezed all over and then drew blood through the nipple to check for silicone. They really hurt right now."

"Wow! So that's why your dad is going to sue that plastic surgeon friend."

"Tom's not my dad! He's creepy and a bragger. But he's good for my mom and is a good deal maker."

Completely nude, Tina moved along the side of her bed and opened the drawer on her nightstand. "Like, you'll have to use a condom."

"I thought you took the pill?"

"I ran out when I was at Key West. Lunelle is a once-a-month injection for birth control. Tom's company is developing it." Tina said with her half-made-up story. She was being paid a thousand dollars for each injection. The condom was for no false positives reporting. "Just put this on and slide up further on the bed."

"You're so beautiful, Tina… I want you so ___" Kevin burped up some bourbon.

"I want you too," Tina replied while sensing that Kevin was fading. "You can choke me or slap me, but just don't touch my boobs."

Those off-the-wall words had Kevin's mind not where he thought it would be for his first time. Tina was good at satisfying men—quickly. Kevin wasn't any different than the men in her past. Guilt, sorrow, regret, or something made this loss of a chaste commitment feel oddly shameful and one-sided. Tina rolled off the bed and put on a bathrobe. "The bathroom is at the end of the hall, where you can clean up." She exited the room to talk about Boxing Day shopping with Nancy.

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Christmas morning with no one up yet. Kevin slipped down the hallway and out the front door. It was an overcast, dreary morning. He got the cell phone out of the glove box and hit the redial button.

"Merry Christmas," rang out from the Nokia.

"Merry Christmas to you also," Kevin replied and then looked back over his shoulder at the front door. "CP, could you call me back in one hour and then play along like there is an emergency or something?"

"Roger that, Bro." CP pulled the phone away from his ear to look at the display. "It's eight twenty now. I'll call you back at nine twenty."

"Great, we'll talk in an hour." Kevin slipped the phone into his pocket and half-stepped back into the house.

"Hey, big guy, how was it last night?" Tom's voice boomed out from the hallway.

Kevin jumped! "Oh wow, you startled me."

"Can I fix you a Bloody Mary?" Tom moved behind the bar.

"No thanks, but I'd take some Tomato juice."

"I'm going to be in the Trask league soon. When the FDA signs off on the Oxycodone approval. I stand to make a big chunk of change."

"Isn't that painkiller similar to Percocet? I know that Percocet destroyed a great basketball player at Duke."

"Don't know and don't care! I'm a UCLA fan. My company spent over three million dollars getting the FDA approval. Now comes our return on investment."

What an asshole, Kevin thought as Tina came from the hallway, rubbing at her eyes. Even with messed-up hair and no makeup, Tina turned heads. "Can I fix my little girl a Bloody Mary?" Tom offered.

"No, Tom! Like, it's not even nine." Tina sat down on the couch and pulled her legs up under herself. Tom was brazenly watching to see if she was nude under the bathrobe. "What time did you get up?" Tina asked Kevin.

"Oh, maybe a half hour ago. I might need…" Kevin got interrupted by the sound of a glass breaking in the kitchen.

"Jesus Christ, my head hurts!" Nancy screamed.

Tom picked up the Oxycodone sampler pack and headed into the kitchen. About fifteen minutes later, Tom and Nancy came back to the party room. The conversation turned to the Victoria's Secret commercials during the Super Bowl, featuring their Angels of lust. Then Tom segued into saying that Nancy should model the Christmas lingerie he had gotten her. It was easy to see where Tina got her good looks. Nancy looked more like Tina's sister than her mother. Nancy promised to do some modeling if they all agreed to go hot-tubbing afterward. Kevin suggested they put off the hot tub until after Christmas dinner at Tony's Fish House. He was hoping that CP would follow through.

"Let's watch some NFL pregame shows." Tom walked toward the big black box projection television that took up most of the end of the party room.

"Sounds good to me," Kevin said with a sigh of relief.

"Let's figure out what we're taking back tomorrow," Tina said to Nancy

"Hey, big guy, tomorrow when they're out shopping, we'll watch some porn on my sixty-inch TV. It's like being there." Tom pointed at the overbearing projection TV. "I got surround sound too."

The bragging and salesman touting continued until Kevin's cell phone rang. "Hello."

"Bro, it's been an hour. I'm ready." CP quietly said.

"No, I'm glad that you called. It sounds important." Kevin spoke loudly into the cell phone.

Tom muted the surround sound system. Nancy and Tina halted their gift sorting ritual.

"Do you think we could put it off for a couple of days?"

"I don't know what you're up to, Kevin, but I think you want me to keep talking for a while."

"Yeah, that's right," Kevin replied. The back-and-forth banter went on for about three minutes before Kevin ended the call.

Tina had moved from the pile of presents and sat next to Kevin. "Like, what is the problem?"

"It looks like I have to head to Oregon."

"No, you can't!" Tina slugged Kevin's arm. "Not on Christmas, nothing can be that important."

"They found a Native American girl working as a road flagger dead, near our helicopter logging site."

"Dead, what happened? Did some logs drop on her?" Tom asked.

"No, they found her under a blue tarp. She was shot in the chest and between the legs. The Warm Springs Police want a statement."

Tina hastily asked, "Like, are you involved?"

"Not really, but Trask Inc. floated the insurance bond for the helicopter; that is all I can say. They want me there in less than forty-eight hours. Getting a flight on Christmas is impossible, so I'm going to drive. I'll go get my stuff." Kevin got up and headed down the hallway.

Tina followed Kevin out to the curb. "Call me when you find out more. Those Indians are wild when they drink their firewater."

Kevin didn't respond. Tina often said things that she was clueless about. "I'll call you when I head down into Warm Springs. Cell phones don't work that well down in the Deschutes River Valley."

"Okay, remember, Mom and I will be shopping all day tomorrow."

"No problem," Kevin hugged Tina, and she stiffened up. "Sorry, I forgot."

"Thanks. Tom keeps offering me that new painkiller. I might have to try some."

"I'd be careful with anything that a doctor doesn't prescribe."

"Tom says that the FDA approved it. That means the Oxy is okay."

Kevin tossed his stuff in the back of the Range Rover. "Have fun shopping tomorrow."

There was one thing still on Tina's mind about last night. She felt uncomfortable asking, but Nancy begged her to. "Do you care if I take the earrings back or sell them to my mom?"

"I don't care." Kevin shut the back lift gate, walked up to the passenger side of the SUV, opened the door, and then opened the glove box. "Here's the receipt."

Tina lifted on her toes and kissed Kevin. "Sorry you're going to miss our second night sleepover."

Yeah, me too, Kevin told himself. He felt somewhat let down about giving up his virginity so openly. At least he'd remember that it was on Christmas Eve.

Tina waited until Kevin turned the corner before she looked at the receipt. *Holy crap, those earrings cost $4,700. I'm going to have a great day shopping tomorrow.*

When Kevin rounded the corner and was sure Tina couldn't see him, he pulled over and called CP. "Bro, thanks for calling back and playing along with me. Have your aunt Ruth at your townhouse in two hours. I'm driving her to Oregon."

"No problem, but you should let me know what's going on. Patty said you were staying over at your college friend with benefits."

"It's kind of private."

"I get it, sorry for prying."

"Thanks, I need to hit the freeway before the thick fog rolls in."

"Yeah, they're talking a giant storm coming in from the west."

"I'll see you in a couple of hours." Kevin tossed the phone onto the passenger seat.

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Kevin and Ruth got on the road after a wonderful Christmas dinner. The plan was to be at the guide shop in Zigzag the following day before dark. Patty's trip calculations included six hours for sleep. Kevin and Ruth made it to Weed, California, before they got a motel. Kevin requested a 6 AM wake-up call for both rooms.

Ruth was waiting in the lobby. "How'd you sleep?" she asked.

"I slept great," Kevin answered. "How did you sleep?"

"Not so good. I'm nervous about how this meeting with Rich is going to go."

"Well, yesterday you told me, not having hope is to deny all the wonderful possibilities that the future may hold," Kevin quoted to the best of what he remembered.

"I know, but it's always easier to spout off witty words than to live by them."

"No kidding!" Kevin spotted a carafe on the breakfast bar. "I'll get a cup of coffee, and then we'd better head out, like a newborn baby."

Ruth laughed, "I'll have to remember those witty words."

Kevin decided to drive up the West Side of the Cascade Mountains. The wet weather front that followed them up from San Diego was already turning to snow on the Siskiyou pass. He called Patty when they got to Salem. "Everything seems to be on schedule. Ruth is nervous and asking you to pray for her."

"I have been, for you also."

When they pulled into the guide shop's parking lot, the closed sign was hanging in the front window. Kevin got out and peered through the door; all the lights were out. He went around the side of the shop and started calling for Tucker. Something felt eerie. Outback Kevin went into Kenneth's shop; it was cold and dark. The burlap bags Tucker slept on were gone, and so was his water bowl. Coming back to the open parking area, the gray sky was starting to spurt snow. He knew cell phone coverage was sporadic in Zigzag, but he answered anyway.

"Kev _____ Kev_n are you there ___? Can you _____ Ruth off at the _____ cabin?"

He started walking around the parking lot, trying to piece together the broken-up conversation. "Do what with Ruth? Where at?"

"Ruth at the Saxton's cabin!" Patty screamed into the office phone. Through the closed president's office doors, Condi overheard and was upset that Patty hadn't heeded her advice about meddling in other people's lives.

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The sky had turned dark grey, and the snow was sticking on the gravel forest road. The Land Rover hunkered down when Kevin engaged four-wheel drive. He crossed the creek, and when he pulled into the opening, he saw headlights coming toward him. Kenneth pulled alongside and then lowered the window on the work truck.

Mary yelled over from the passenger seat. "Hello, Ruth, glad to finally meet you!"

"You also, Mary," Ruth yelled over to the worn-out truck.

"We had to let Richard in on the surprise."

"Oh, how did he react?" Ruth held her breath.

"He wants to see you!"

Ruth didn't respond. The words felt good; it was prayers answered.

"You'll best get Mrs. Johnson up there and head back out. We're going to get dumped on tonight." Richard pointed up and out the side window at the heavy, dark grey clouds building above the tall Douglas fir trees.

"Ruth, there's stuff in the ice chest and more food in the critter-proof box. I hope you can cook on a wood stove." Mary was leaning across Ken.

"I grew up in Alabama. All we had was a wood-burning stove."

"You'd best get moving, young man, or else these two will be yakking about cooking till dark." Richard took his foot off the brake and eased away from the Range Rover.

Kevin parked between the old, dead snag and the deck. Richard came out of the A-frame cabin, walked across the deck, down the stairs, and opened the passenger door. "I have missed you so much, and…"

Ruth slipped off the seat. They hugged, tears surged, and Kevin thought, *That went better than I expected*. He got two suitcases from the back, walked up the three stairs, and set them in the two inches of snow that had piled up on the deck.

Richard grabbed his hand and said, "Thanks, Kevin. Thanks for all that you did to make this happen."

"No problem. Glad to do it." Kevin got back in the Range Rover and drove off.

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The lights were on in the guide shop, and something just didn't feel right when Tucker didn't come running when the bells on the door clanged. Kenneth came down the hallway and stood behind the glass display case. "How'd it all finish up at the cabin? Were those two fighting like dogs or acting like love birds?"

"I'd say acting more like love birds."

Kenneth turned and yelled down the hall. "Good work, Mary. They're acting like love birds."

"Snow was stacking up and covering the deck when I pulled away."

"I'm glad I showed Rich how to fire up the old soak tub," Ken winked at Kevin.

Mary emerged from the kitchen. "Kenneth, you men all think the same way. I didn't even tell Ruth to pack a swimsuit."

"That's a good thing," Kenneth looked over and smiled at Mary.

From behind the display case, Mary asked Kevin, "So, you think this little rendezvous will work out?"

"I hope so. I've known the Johnsons all my life. They're good people and since Jabbar…" Kevin quit talking. *Oops, I forgot the Saxtons also lost a son.*

"Rich told me about Jabbar getting killed because one punk ass gang banger wears blue and the other red. Their son was wearing the wrong color school jacket, and he wasn't even in a gang. Those punk ass kids need jobs," Ken offered with scorn.

"Kevin, you're right about how hard it is for parents when they lose a child," Mary spoke softly.

"I know about Billy, and I'm so sorry." Kevin felt horrible.

"Well, how about some leftovers for dinner? You have to be tired after that long drive from Weed."

"I need to get a motel for tonight. So, I'll have to pass on dinner."

"You ain't going to find a motel tonight. This is Christmas break! The skiers will have everything booked. You can crash in Lilly's bed." Kenneth spoke like a sergeant giving orders.

"I'd rather he sleep in Billy's room," Mary said with hesitance.

"No, not yet, Mary. It just doesn't feel right, yet." Kenneth loosely argued. "Besides, Lilly won't be back for three days."

The back-and-forth banter went on for a few minutes. Kevin wasn't sure if he'd find a room, and he wanted to be at the Warm Springs police department first thing in the morning. "How about if I sleep in a sleeping bag in front of the fireplace?"

Mary smiled. "That will work. Kenny, don't you have an old army cot out in your shop?"

"Yeah, up in the rafters. You want to help me get the sleeping stuff, young man?"

"Sure," replied Kevin and followed Ken out into the falling snow.

There was a deep not wanting to know, but Kevin probed anyway. "I noticed the burlap bags are gone." He pointed to a corner toward the wood burner made from a 50-gallon barrel.

"Yep, I buried Tucker in those burlap bags. He loved lying on them over there by the heat. He was my shop buddy when I tuned up my saws and sharpened chains."

"Oh… Did Tucker die of old age?"

"No, someone backed over him in the parking lot. I had to put him down."

"What the hell! Why wasn't the person looking?"

"Don't know. Mike, the kid at the grocery store across the highway, got the plate number. The police said it was a rental car, and without video, they can't do much." Ken handed Kevin a cot and pad. "Sleeping bags are inside the house. You'll want a heavy bag tonight. It's going to be cold as a witch's tit by morning."

Kevin smirked. "I never felt a witch's tit." He was glad the subject changed.

"Me neither," Ken replied with a lumberjack grin.

Leftover turkey and ham hit the spot. Fried potato garlic pancakes were something Kevin had never experienced. He eyeballed the last one, but Kenneth's fork claimed it first. That worked out to be a good thing, because Ken didn't get the last piece of Mary's apple pie with raisins and walnuts. The scoop of vanilla ice cream on top was worth surrendering the potato

pancake. Kevin flashed Kenneth a devilish grin and rolled his eyes with every bite.

Mary and Ken thanked Kevin umpteen times for everything he had done for the Saxton family and the logging business. They were especially grateful for Lilly going back to Washington, D.C. to testify about steelhead runs and her outdoor guide business. An unexpected outcome was a boom in her client base. She was booked up through spring for steelhead and salmon fishing. She was currently at the mouth of the John Day River for three days, guiding a junior congressman from Kansas. This was the second trip for the young congressman from Kansas.

While sleeping in front of the river-rock fireplace, Kevin first dreamed about Lilly and the junior congressmen sleeping in the same tent, after drinking wine and a dinner cooked over a campfire. Then his dream turned to Christmas Eve with Tina—although he'd not heeded his granddad's advice—the stayover turned out to be shallow, at least they had safe sex.

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Early the next morning, Kevin was awakened by the sound of a snowblower in the parking lot out front. The fire was no more than orange embers when Mary handed him a cup of coffee and a bath towel and pointed him to the bathroom. The bathroom was smaller than most motel bathrooms. The combo shower-bathtub valve was hard to adjust. The cool shower with snow outside felt like some sort of punishing wake-up call.

Kenneth was sitting at the small kitchen table, drinking coffee, when Kevin came out of the bathroom. "The highway department just came by with their plows. You shouldn't have a problem getting to Warm Springs. Just take it easy on the long downgrade."

"Thanks, I know all about the Warm Springs downgrades." Kevin set the empty coffee cup on the counter. "Thank you both for everything." He slightly hugged Mary and shook Ken's hand. Kevin wasn't one for lengthy goodbyes.

"Let me refill your coffee for the road." Mary was holding back tears.

"I don't want to take one of Lilly's thermos cups advertising her guide service."

"It's okay, she just ordered more of them, since she's now getting clients from all over the States. Thanks to you!"

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Highway 26 was plowed all the way to where the tall Douglas fir trees ended, and the high desert started. There was just a small

trace of snow on the westside downgrade. Inside the police station, Kevin stood at a small interrogation table and laid out copies of documents. A short, heavyset detective picked up one paper. The top button on his white shirt was undone; the dark blue tie held the sweat-stained collar somewhat closed. "You told me that you were not coming back to Central Oregon."

"My plans changed. That's a fax and some more documents for proof of where I was on the weekend you requested. The phone number of the church of the baptism is at the bottom." Kevin pointed at the papers.

The detective picked up another paper and gave it a slow glance. "Well, it looks like you're no longer a suspect. This baptismal record proves that you were back in Michigan when Aiana Smith was murdered." The detective slipped the papers into the file folder he was holding. "You're free to go!"

Kevin headed south on the long upgrade on Highway 26. It felt good to have this last item in Central Oregon completed. With a spotty cell signal in the Deschutes River canyon, he planned to call Tina from Madras. Hopefully, she'll be out of bed by then. With his parents in Mexico, they'd have the entire Trask mansion to themselves. He'd fly her to Pasadena to have a private New Year's celebration.

About two miles from Madras, three bright yellow poster boards were nailed onto three consecutive fence posts. The first sign read: **Aussie Pups.** The second read: **Great cattle dog.** The last sign read**: Made in USA.** *I wonder if? No, they like Labs. Plus, it's probably too soon. Plus…*

Kevin drove into town and pulled into a farm store parking lot. The cell phone displayed four signal bars, and he dialed. "Is Tina there?"

"No, some Red Cross official flew her back east for an interview. She might be working with Liddy Dole doing public relations stuff."

"When is she going to be back?"

"After New Year's. That high-ranking Red Cross official said he'd show her around."

"Oh," Kevin was let down. He'd planned to show Tina around the Pasadena Country Club before they returned to the Trask home. "Tom, thanks for the update."

"Not a problem, big guy. But you'd better learn to take care of the home front if you want it to stay at home." Tom barked out the words like they were written in stone.

"What's that mean?"

"Women want shit that you don't even know about. I'll send you a book about control through dominance. Maybe you'll figure it out before it's too late. They won't stay home being traditional

or a square all the time. Deep down, women like bad boys, not prudes."

"Forget the book and have a good New Year." Kevin abruptly ended the call. *Tom's a piece of shit. I bet he bats Nancy around with that dominance BS.*

Now that there wasn't a rush to get back home, Kevin decided to have lunch at the Black Bear restaurant across the street from the farm store.

The weather channel on the television hanging above the counter was predicting a foot of snow in the mountains. Kevin started thinking about staying around to ski at one of Oregon's resorts. The waitress laid out three options, head back north to Mt. Hood Meadows or Timberline Lodge, or go south to Mt. Bachelor. Kevin had played golf at Sunriver Resort before but never skied there. The waitress warned that snowboarders were taking over Mt. Bachelor.

Two miles north of Madras, Kevin turned west onto a red cinder road. There was an American flag sticker on a self-closing gate. A pole building on the left was about half full with bales of hay stacked twenty feet tall. A green-and-yellow John Deere tractor was parked just inside a light-blue metal building. About a hundred head of cattle began trotting toward the Range Rover as a second self-operating gate opened. The red cinder road wrapped around the blue metal outbuilding and ended at a double-wide manufactured home.

Two young boys with cowboy hats came running. "Can I help you, sir?" the older boy asked.

"I saw the sign about Aussie Pups," Kevin said and then stepped out.

"Here we'll show you!" The smaller boy grabbed Kevin's hand and started to pull him toward the blue metal building.

"Sadie had seven pups," the older brother yelled as he took the lead position.

They went in around the John Deere and then between a baling machine and a disk plow. There was a heat lamp shining into a sectioned-off part of a stall. Kevin looked over the top, and six fluff balls were playing, sleeping, and tumbling over each other.

"You can't have that one. He's staying here to be another cattle dog." The older boy pointed at the biggest pup.

"I like this one!" The smaller boy pointed to a black-and-white-and-brown pup with one blue eye. "He is handsome!"

"I don't know if I need a boy," Kevin said.

"Boys are better," both boys yelled in unison.

A rancher rode into the building on an ATV. "Mike Harper here! How ya doing?" The stocky-built rancher dismounted the ATV. He had the look of a linebacker. "I just put my signs out this morning.

You can take the pick of the litter. Females are seven hundred, and males are five hundred."

"I don't know much about dogs. I was thinking about getting one for a gift."

"This isn't going to be a late Christmas present for your kids, is it? That's why I didn't put my signs out until this morning. These aren't pups that do well cooped up in a house."

"No, I don't have kids. It would be for a logging family that lives over in Zigzag. Someone ran over their Labrador, Tucker."

"That's my name!" the younger boy yelled out.

"That's the circle of life," Mike said matter-of-factly. "In my opinion, the Aussies are a harder-working breed than Labs. They will try to herd and even nip at kids if you don't work with them."

"Well, Lilly is the youngest, and she's older than me. By the way, I'm Kevin."

"You got a last name?" Mike asked as he pulled off his right work glove.

"Yeah, Trask," Kevin shook Mike's bare hand.

"You look familiar," Mike looked hard at Kevin. "You from around here?"

"No!" Kevin turned his head. "What's that whimpering over there?"

"That's the runt. I'm probably going to have to put her down." Mike replied.

"What for?" Kevin asked in stunned words

"She's about half blind and probably about half deaf."

"Is that a reason to kill her?"

"Hey, I'm a rancher. I have to put down yearlings all the time. You start breeding animals with weak genetics, and you could ruin an entire breed."

"That just doesn't sound right."

"Hey, city boy, let me show you something." Mike pulled his glove back on.

"How do you know that I'm from the city?"

"The California plates on a fifty-thousand-dollar SUV sort of gave you up."

Kevin followed Mike over to the cardboard box, and then Mike picked up the tiny four-pound mixed white, brown, and black fur ball. "See her two blue eyes. That's not a dominant gene trait. See the pink spots on her nose. A dog's nose should go all black by nine weeks. This pup has too many recessive gene markers."

Kevin was silent until Mike put the lone pup back into the small cardboard box. "How do your kids deal with this kind of stuff?"

"Ranchers and farmers feed the world. My kids know about the circle of life; that's why we don't let them name the runts. They might not like it, but they understand."

Back at the sectioned-off stall, the conversation turned more cordial. Kevin ended up purchasing a tri-colored male with one blue eye and a solid black nose. They agreed that Kevin could bring the pup back if it wasn't a good fit.

On the hour-long drive back to Zigzag, the pup whimpered and cried; it was the first pup to be separated from the litter. Actually, a day ago, the runt was the first to be separated to avoid distressing the mother. Kevin was hoping the tri-marked pup would be to the Saxtons' liking. Kevin's stomach knotted when he went through the front door. The bells hanging from the doorknob alerted the Aussie pup, and it nuzzled its head out from Kevin's armpit.

"Be right there!" Ken's deep voice and heavy footsteps bellowed from the hallway. "What do you have there?" Ken asked.

Kevin's stomach was double-knotted. He didn't expect Kenneth to be home.

"Ah… I thought you might like a new dog. If you don't, I can…"

Ken came around the glass display case and took the pup from Kevin. "Look, here, it's a baby Aussie." Ken held the pup up and checked the gender. "How old is this little guy?"

"Ten weeks." Kevin swallowed hard.

"Let's go show the little guy to Mary. She's been on the phone for a half hour."

Kevin followed Ken into the kitchen, and her eyes danced. "Here, take this," she handed the yellow wall phone receiver to Kevin.

"Hello," Kevin said into the handset.

"Kevin, I've left three messages on your cell phone. Condi set up a meeting with Hung Meng's team the day after New Year's."

"That sounds great. I was headed for home but got sidetracked." Kevin watched Mary get cream from the refrigerator. Ken pulled a piece of jerky from the tattered pocket on his blue flannel shirt and let the puppy start chewing on the end of the strip.

Kevin put his hand over the handset and held out the keys. "There's some puppy food in the Range Rover."

"What?" Patty said and then listened.

"In a brown paper bag. There's American Kennel Club paperwork in an envelope on the seat." Ken took the keys.

"What?" Patty said for the second time.

Mary took the pup from Ken. "Go get this little guy's food, Kenneth. That venison jerky is not good for him."

"Patty, I'll be back before the meeting."

"Okay, I'll let Condi know."

"A snowstorm is coming. Can you stay another night?" Mary asked as she poured cream into a saucer. "Lilly will be home

tomorrow; she had to end the guide trip early. Her client got the cold chills."

"I'd like to. But I need to get back to work to prepare for an important meeting." Kevin neglected to say that he had new plans for two days of skiing at Mt. Bachelor. "If you two are good with the pup, I need to hit the road."

After twenty more minutes, puppy-loving Kevin left. It was snowing hard, and below, freezing, the headlights on the plowed snow berms helped navigate south on Highway 26 toward Sun River Resort. Kevin scanned the radio station and found a ski report. A foot of new snow with two days of sunshine ahead sounded great. He'd get a good night's sleep and head up to Mount Bachelor mid-morning to avoid the early diehard snowboarders.

The snow berms were smaller when he broke out of the trees onto the high desert. As he passed Mike Harper's ranch, the headlights' blue beams made the three yellow posters appear as bright green. A lone mercury-vapor light on a power pole cast an amber glow around the double-wide manufactured home.

Rancher Mike is a hard ass. Telling his kids not to name the farm animals seems harsh. I know the circle-of-life story… Dog breeding or raising cattle are two things I will never do. Having to kill something just because it's small or weak would be haunting.

Madras was dark and mostly closed up. Kevin pulled into the same farm store he had been at five hours ago and noticed the flashing time-and-temperature sign on the Madras City Bank: 7:25 pm, 19 degrees, flashed back and forth. He parked next to an irrigation canal, reminding him of the concrete-banked LA River where city kids would catch sewer fish—some would even take their catch home to eat.

I wonder how Lilly's fishing trip ended up in this freezing weather. Fishing for Marlin in shorts and a tank top is more my speed. I wonder if she knows about Tucker? The circle of life really hurts…

Like a compass always pointing north, Kevin felt the directional pull. Two miles back, he turned on the blinker and went through the first automatic gate. When the second gate opened, the porch light came on, and the silhouette of Mike holding a rifle appeared in the doorway.

Kevin flashed his high beams, and Mike put up his hand to block the glare. Mike met Kevin as he pulled the Range Rover up to a horse hitching rail.

"What, are you bringing back the pup?" Mike rested the rifle on his shoulder.

Kevin's heart was racing. "I thought you were going to shoot the SUV."

"This 22-varmint gun with bird shot wouldn't even put out those high beams." Mike leaned the rifle against the hitching rail. "Your friends didn't like the Aussie?"

"No, they loved the dog. I'm back to buy the runt."

"You don't want her. With her poor hearing and sight, she'll cost you a fortune in vet bills."

"We have a cyclone fence at our business and an on-site security guard. She'll be fine."

"Okay, I'll let you have the runt only if you promise to fix her."

"I'll do whatever I can to keep her healthy."

"I mean to get her spayed."

"Yeah, that too, no problem."

A woman came to the front door. Her silhouette showed that she was pregnant. She yelled. "Mike, is everything okay?"

"Yeah, the guy who bought a pup this afternoon is back. I'm sending him your way." Mike handed Kevin the rifle and then headed for the outbuilding.

"Here!" Kevin handed the rifle to Mrs. Harper when he got to the top of the stairs.

"Let's go inside, it's freezing out here." She tightened the sash on a terry cloth robe and stepped back.

A woodstove was blazing in a large room that was the front room and eating area combined. Family pictures and 4-H ribbons were decorating the walls. An open cabinet with three Rodeo belt buckles and a few trophies was next to a small portable television with bent, rabbit ears. Next to it was a weather station and a well-worn Bible.

"I'm sorry about coming by so late."

"Not a problem. My boys talked about you at dinner tonight. They like your fancy SUV. They said it had cool blue fog lights."

"They probably would have liked the concept race car I had. But it would have been horrible in the snow over Mount Hood."

"We haven't had that much snow so far this year. Not like last year. Could be a poor hay year."

Their small talk continued until the sound of boots stomping on the front porch was followed by Mike pushing the front door open. He set the box in front of the wood stove. "We'll let her warm up for a few minutes. She hasn't had the pups to cuddle with."

"Mike separated her from the litter yesterday. She shouldn't whimper too badly." Mrs. Harper spoke softly, knowing her boys had their ears to the bedroom door.

"You said the females were seven hundred?" Kevin asked, clueless that the boys were supposed to be sleeping.

Mike took off his hat and hung it on a rack made out of steer horns. "I can't take anything for the runt. That just wouldn't be right."

Kevin walked over to the cardboard box. The heated air around the wood stove felt like a sauna. The small puppy was curled up in a ball, lying on straw. "I need to give you something for her."

"I know who you are." Mrs. Harper was still speaking softly.

Oh no, here it comes, Kevin prepared himself.

"You're that new football coach at Warm Springs who played for the Duke Blue Devils. You brought along that team chaplain who has a photographic memory. His name is Augustine."

"He goes by Gus," Kevin replied.

"Anyway, that Mr. Gus told those boys to believe in themselves and to trust in God."

"That would be Gus," Kevin smirked with a smile.

"Well, that big overweight kid who picked up the fumble and then lumbered into the end zone. That was my nephew." Mrs. Harper said proudly. "If it weren't for the believe in yourself coaching, Jake would have just fallen on the ball."

"I remember Jake, he's a big kid. He carried a couple of players into the end zone."

"That one play changed Jake's whole life," Mike said with sincerity and respect.

There was noise and a commotion down the hall.

"I'd better get going. I want to get to Bend before nine." Kevin picked up the box. Mike opened the door.

"Hey, Mister," a small voice filled the room.

Kevin turned and saw that Tucker was still half-asleep, rubbing his eyes and standing at the end of the hallway in superhero PJs.

"Mister, thank you for coming back. At bedtime prayer tonight, I asked Jesus to save Missy Girl."

Chap 36——————Roger that

New Year's is the day for goal-setting and reflection. The majority of people should look at their past goals and say the hell with this year. Eating better and exercising more are important goals, just like getting organized and decluttering, but the truth is, life gets in the way for most working stiffs. Kevin had only a few goals, and they weren't work-related. Trekking around the planet and being done with the family business was in his grasp, so that he could do his own thing. Being beholden to wealth and power that are not earned can be a horrible burden. Most lottery winners destroy themselves within five years. Opposites attract, making Tina worthy of rekindling their relationship.

Mr. Hung Meng's goals were usually set around the Chinese Lunar New Year, known as the Spring Festival or Chunjie, which typically falls between January 21 and February 20. The April 26, 1986, Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant was a goal he worked on for over six years, and it didn't matter what the exact lunar or solar date was. Recruiting a plant worker to lower the fuel rods into the cooling pool of reactor 4 did cause a steam explosion. Reactor 3 was damaged and leaked radioactive fallout, but an unexplainable wind from the southeast blew the fallout away from any major cities. A total of 31 people lost their lives, a minuscule fraction of what the world news was broadcasting if the wind had not changed direction.

Three suitcase nuclear bombs going off in Los Angeles within the first six seconds of Y2K would extinguish millions of lives. While the populace would be focused on ushering in the New Century, a boot-sector virus would be infecting every business and home computer running Unix, Windows, Linux, or iOS. Hung Meng's long-range goal was out of sync with the United States' drive for technology; connecting everything and everybody to deliver free speech to every corner of the world. Propaganda to suppress and control the common working class would happen six seconds into the new century. Communist China, North Korea, and some Middle

Eastern countries would gain a foothold. What kind of world would it be without the United States digital superiority? That was Hung Meng's goal—to destroy technology and shut down free speech worldwide.

Augustine Watt only had a few goals. The main one was to do good so to defeat death in the state of grace and not be laid at rest. His faith was so pure and strong that he need not fear the perpetual bright light sending him back. Gus was the last in his family to be left behind. He'd only been held in his mother's womb—never hugged by her arms. Autism made Gus seek an order for the natural laws, to love God, and to love all his neighbors.

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The Trask manufacturing building with an empty parking lot looked eerie on the first day of the New Year. The morning winter fog had rolled into the Long Beach Harbor and slowed Gus's ride back from church. Kevin had called Gus on his cell phone; they planned to meet at the security gate at 10:30. Kevin was standing on Navy Way Road, looking east, when Gus emerged from the gray, wet haze. *I need to go slow with Gus. This surprise could throw his life off track. But hopefully, it will give him a reason to move off-site.*

Gus peddled full speed when he saw Kevin. "I'm sorry, Mr. Kevin Trask," Gus said while catching his breath. "Church was extra-long, we celebrated the Solemnity of Mary, Mother of Jesus."

"No problem, Gus. We've only been waiting a few minutes."

Gus got confused. He didn't understand the 'we have' statement.

"Push your three-wheeler over there by the guard shack. I have something to show you."

"Okay, Mr. Kevin Tra--, Tra--, Trask." Things jumped more out of order when Kevin opened the lift gate on the Range Rover. There lay Missy on a dog bed that was four times too big for her. The small, gray-blue eyes blinked at Kevin's silhouette and then fixed on Gus.

Kevin picked up Missy and gently handed her to Gus. There was a long silence as Gus shifted from an unwavering state to a relaxed joy. "I feel a tiny heart beating against mine." Missy started licking Gus under his chin.

"Missy likes you!" Kevin pointed into the back of the Range Rover. "She has a night crate, some toys, and food."

Gus didn't hear Kevin; he was looking at Missy's cloudy eyes. "She's like me. Missy is not perfect."

"Yes, Missy doesn't see very well, and she is hard of hearing. But just like you, she has her special talents."

"What do you mean?"

"Put her down and start walking toward the basketball hoop."

Gus put Missy down and took three steps. Missy followed and then stopped. Gus took about five steps and stopped. Missy followed, stopped, and sniffed Gus's left pant leg. Gus walked all the way to the basketball hoop, and Missy heeled. Kevin had figured out that, lacking sight and hearing, Missy was a great dog to walk with; she would not leave your side and was not distracted by sounds. At the basketball hoop, Gus bent over and picked up Missy and put her to his chest.

Kevin opened the guard shack and pushed the button for the security gate. It looked like a circus act as Gus walked in different directions and circles with Missy following at his heels. Kevin pulled to the back corner of the building. His plan was working—even though an alternative motive was being played. He unloaded a dog crate, at least a dozen toys, an oversized bed, and three types of dog food. The stainless-steel personalized water and food bowls had "Missy" engraved on their rims. Kevin neatly stacked everything in front of Gus's apartment door. The plan was on track.

A sharp, high-pitched whine followed by three yips got Kevin's attention. When he ran around the front corner, Gus had put Missy into the large rear basket on his three-wheeler. Missy's front legs were smaller than the wire spacing on the basket, and she was trapped. Gus was canting back and forth, not sure what to do.

Kevin gently lifted Missy out of the basket and freed her tiny front legs. "Gus, that's not your fault. You didn't hurt her. She just got scared." Kevin carefully handed Missy back to Gus, and she started licking Gus under the chin.

It took most of New Year's Day for Kevin to lay out, cut, and TIG-Weld aluminum to fit the basket on the three-wheeler. Kevin shaped and curved a top to resemble a big lunchbox. The locking latch was added as a precaution, not that anyone would steal a runt. The retrofit dog box took over five hours to build. It felt good to be operating all the metalworking tools Grandpa Trask had mentored him on.

Gus spent most of the time walking Missy all around the plant, the parking lot, the back lot, and then finding precise places for the things Kevin had bought for Missy. It was already dark when Kevin sent Gus to the receiving department to find padding for the inside of the doghouse carrier. Missy stayed at Kevin's side when Gus headed off with a measuring tape in hand.

"This is going to work out well for you and Gus," Kevin puppy talked to Missy, as he placed her on a workbench.

After about twenty minutes, Gus came back with some blue two-inch foam. "Will this work, Mr. Kevin Trask?"

"Let's see." Kevin opened the hinged top and placed the dense foam in the bottom of the aluminum box. "Yeah, it works just fine."

"Missy will like the windows you made." Gus pointed at the portholes on all four sides.

"Let's see how she likes it," Kevin replied.

Gus drew a deep breath and exhaled. "Missy cried last time…"

Kevin took her from the workbench and handed her to Gus. "Go ahead and put Missy in her travel box."

Overcoming self-doubt, Gus gently placed Missy on the foam. Like the comfort of a baby's blanket, her tiny feet felt secure. She turned in circles, while kneading the foam, then lay down resting her head on her front legs. "Missy likes her travel box." Gus hugged Kevin, practically lifting him off the ground.

"Go ahead and take her for a ride." Kevin closed and latched the lid.

Gus peddled around the outside of the assembly line while Kevin put tools back. He forgot to shut off the Argon gas for the TIG welder. On the third time around, Gus stopped. "Missy didn't cry at all. She's tired."

Kevin lifted the lid, and Missy was curled up in a corner, lightly panting. "Why don't you go feed Missy in your apartment?"

"Oh no, Mr. Kevin Trask! Oh no… I can't keep Missy overnight."

"You feed Missy, and I'll go get us takeout. Do you feel like Italian or Chinese food?"

Gus thought for the longest time. "I feel like spaghetti, but I want fortune cookies."

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It took over an hour for Gus to feed and keep putting Missy back in her bed before she fell asleep. Kevin returned with Italian takeout and a white bag of fortune cookies, but what he didn't expect was to see an old Navy cot set up next to Gus's bed.

It was late by the time they finished eating. Kevin was dead tired and decided to lie down on the cot for a short nap. He watched Gus quietly pull a chair next to Missy's bed, fold his hands, and quietly say a prayer. That was the last thing Kevin visualized.

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"What happened to you?" Condi asked. "It looks like you slept under a rock."

"I fell asleep on an old Navy cot in Gus's apartment," Kevin answered. "Sleeping under a rock would have been more comfortable."

"You're about forty-five minutes early. The land sale meeting is at 9:00 am."

"Is there anything we need to go over before Mr. Meng and his team show up?"

"Not really. He's good with a closing date of June first. I'm going to make him sign a million-dollar, non-refundable earnest money deposit."

"Wow, how did you swing that?" Kevin asked while running his fingers through his messed-up hair.

"Mr. Meng is powerful and wants everything his way. I had to put him in his place! I told him that the uncertainty of outsourcing wasn't fair to our workers. I told his team to put up or shut up."

"Wow, Mr. Meng must respect you now!"

"Hung Meng doesn't respect women! He wouldn't even acknowledge I was on the conference call with the attorneys."

There was a knock on the door of the office. "Come in," Condi said with authority.

One side of the heavy wood door creaked open, and Missy was poked between them.

"What the heck?" Condi chided with impatience.

"Look what Kevin brought to work!" Patty stepped all the way into the president's office.

"Puppies should not be at the workplace," Condi said with zero emotion.

"Well, this one is going to be allowed," Kevin informed Condi.

"Okay, but a dog running all over is an accident ready to happen. There could be a huge fine or a lawsuit."

"Missy won't run all over. She's almost blind and can barely hear."

"Oh…" Condi replied with a softer tone. "By the way, since you two are here." Condi swallowed hard. "I want to thank both of you for getting my parents together. I talked to my mom yesterday, and she wants to have Ali for a week to play in the snow and stay in some old A-frame cabin up in Oregon."

"That sounds fun!" Patty said after rubbing her nose against Missy's pink-and-black nose. "Has Ali ever played in the snow?"

"No," Condi quipped. "I think a trip up North might be good for all of us. Mom said something about a winter run or fishing or something like fishing and running."

"If you want me to drive Ali and you to Oregon, I will. I'm waiting in line for a fishing trip myself," Kevin offered.

"I'll let you know," Condi stared at Missy and couldn't help but smile. "Right now, we need to get ready for our meeting. We have less than thirty minutes."

Patty handed Missy to Kevin and went back to the reception area to get ready. Kevin went downstairs and headed across the

parking lot to the guard shack. "Where's your three-wheeler?" Kevin asked.

"Oh, a couple of guys took it and said that they would paint the dog box you built to match my bike."

"Can you watch Missy? I have an important meeting."

"Yes, Mr. Kevin Trask. I was just about to do a back lot inspection." Gus took Missy from Kevin and then clipped on a red leash.

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With finger-combed hair and a strong dog smell, Kevin was the last to enter the conference room. Condi was sliding copies of the million-dollar earnest agreement to Mr. Meng's team. Patty got ready to write down anything that was spoken in Chinese. There was some back-and-forth discussion about the closing date, and Mr. Meng's team was pushing to move the June date to May.

Kevin jumped in. "Gentlemen, I think we need to stick to the June first closing date. I have a Trask insurance bond on a logging site up in Oregon. A person died on the helicopter site, and that needs to be settled."

Condi was clueless about what Kevin just said, but Patty knew most of the details. Mr. Hung Meng knew all about the death of Officer Bull Elk. He'd ordered it.

Kevin continued, "I'm currently in conversation with the Warm Springs Police Department. It was a Native American girl who was working as a road flagger. Since it was a murder, the case is going to take some time. I want to have everything wrapped up so that the land sale can close without problems."

Mr. Meng was trying to hold a straight face. He had suspected that Tim had gone rogue, but didn't know he had killed more than one Native American.

Condi jumped into the conversation. "Patty and I will start working on this last-minute item immediately. It should not affect or jeopardize the sale of Trask Inc."

Mr. Hung Meng pushed the earnest money document back toward Condi. "Make a deal on May one, or I don't sign!"

"No!" Condi replied and shoved the paper back to Mr. Meng. "June first is what we agreed on. It is only fair to the workers**.** We can move the date back, if you agree to keep the plant open for the rest of nineteen ninety-nine."

"Not agreeable! Bad deal."

"Trask production numbers are up, and we are more profitable than ever. You should be happy making more money. How about agreeing not to outsource for two years, if the rate of return on your investment stays above eight percent?" Condi argued.

Mr. Meng sat silent and then whispered to his team. The conversation was too low for Patty to interpret. One of Mr. Meng's lawyers spoke. "We will agree to June first and to keep the current workforce for at least one year. But all the salaried managers will have to go, along with the security guard."

Mr. Meng gave Condi some recognition with a sinister smile that was more like an up yours.

"We can probably work with that," Kevin said. "I just got our security guard a new puppy that I hope will give him something else to focus on. Gus has been fixated on a submarine, some training tunnel folklore, and a superhero legend that almost sounds believable."

Mr. Hung Meng's head reeled from Condi to Kevin. "We must make deal now. Security guard must move this week."

"I'll keep working on Gus. But he stays until Trask Inc. is sold." Kevin replied, not looking up from a copy of the land sale contract.

"Mr. Augustine is a big part of this contract. We want an addendum added on a moving date," one of the CCP attorneys argued.

"Sign the earnest money agreement today, or we can start all over!" Condie bluffed.

In a contained rage, Mr. Hung Meng signed the million-dollar earnest money receipt and then looked directly at Condi and said, "你这婊子，真会硬着头皮讨价还价."

Patty wrote the Chinese words on her notepad and then slid them to Condi. **You, the black bitch, drive a hard bargain.**

"I'll take that as a compliment, Hung." Condi stood up from her position at the end of the table, walked down the side of the long conference table, and leaned over Mr. Meng's shoulder. "Don't forget to date the contract right there, you old bastard," She pointed next to the signature line.

Mr. Hung Meng signed and dated the contract, threw the pen on the conference table, and stormed out of the building with his team in tow. When the security gate raised, Mr. Meng pointed and yelled the order, "让 Tim Baylor 蒂姆·贝勒杀死奥古斯丁 Agustine Watt."

Having an American citizen kill another American citizen was a clever tactical move. The CCP had years, tons of legal tender, and pounds of skin invested in the six-second-after-Y2k-midnight mission. In retrospect, there was a sex worker's head, a dock boy's lungs, Myung Chan's hand, two Native Americans, and even a Black Labrador. Now, a guard with autism was on the chopping block.

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Kevin left the conference room amazed and thrilled that Condi had secured a million-dollar earnest-money agreement. By summer, he'd be free to start trekking all over the world. By the end of the day, Tim Baylor would get the orders to eliminate this last obstruction, along with the runt.

At the bottom of the stairs, something felt off. Kevin wandered out the double doors into the plant. Immediately, a worker started toward him. "Hey, did you use my tools yesterday?"

"Yeah, I welded up a dog box for the back of Gus's three-wheeler."

"That's what Gus said. Do you know that you left the Argon gas on?"

Kevin paused to reflect. "You're right, I think I did forget."

"Well, you'd better double-check next time. Argon displaces oxygen; a concentration of thirty percent can cause severe oxygen deprivation. Plus, it can be a twenty-thousand-dollar OSHA fine."

"Oh… Do we fill out a report or something?"

"No screw OSHA. By the way, at lunch, we'd like to pull the dog box off and paint it to match the three-wheeler. You know how things have to be just so for Gus."

"That sounds right," Kevin replied. "Do it whenever, you don't have to do it on your lunch hour."

"Maybe we'll do it after work. We're trying to set some new numbers for units completed. We all know about the outsourcing stipulation in the contract."

Kevin froze and now noticed about thirty other workers fixated on him. It wasn't a death walk, but it was a stoic shuffle as Kevin left the building. Gus held up Missy when Kevin pulled through the gate and headed for his favorite lunch and drinking place.

"Cutty Sark or a margarita today?" The bartender asked, wiping down the bar.

"I'll just have hot coffee today. I want to sit out on the deck after I order lunch."

"It's cold out there. But it does look like the fog is lifting."

"I got a ski jacket in the SUV. I'll take that pulled pork burrito that you have listed for the special today."

Kevin retrieved his jacket and was the lone soul on the deck. As he drank coffee, he could make out an outline of a super tanker anchored not far off the Navy Road Jetty. It was not a crisp, clear view—neither was his musing. *Maybe using a puppy to steer Gus off sight is the wrong thing to do? Maybe all the Trask managers being out of work is the wrong approach? Maybe I should have stood my ground and insisted that the plant stay open for five years? Maybe…*

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Tim just got off the phone with Mr. Hung Meng's interpreter and was searching for answers as well. The CCP interpreter reminded him about what happened to Myung Chan when fingerprint evidence was left behind. Tim was ordered to take care of the security guard at the Trask manufacturing plant as cunningly as he did Officer Bull Elk. This mission had to be completed within the week, leaving no evidence behind.

Three days into 1999, Tim staked out the Trask plant with a spotting scope from inside a railroad boxcar. He watched the last employee leave the parking lot, then watched Gus put Missy into the freshly painted box on the back of the three-wheeler. *If this guy doesn't drive, I can't do him in with carbon monoxide. Hung Meng's interpreter said he lives in an apartment on the northwest corner of the building.* Tim watched Gus pedal around and check for locked doors. *I could pick him off of that retard trike with a hunting rifle. It would be like shooting the moving ducks at a carnival. But I need a non-suspicious kill to get back on Mr. Meng's good side.*

The next day, Tim took up a new post from a different train car where he could watch the west side of the building. There was a single door to Gus's apartment; farther south along the cinder-block wall, double doors with KEEP OUT signs caught Tim's interest. *Keep out, usually means danger; maybe that is the place to stage a killing to look like an accident.* Tim observed Gus come out a couple of times to have Missy do her business. *Somehow, if that dog got out into the train yard and under a boxcar, I could Rohypnol the big idiot. That dog never leaves his side. Maybe tie or glue the mutt to the tracks under a car.*

At five forty-five, same as the day before, Gus checked that all doors were locked. Then he placed Missy in the padded dog box and headed across the parking lot. Tim rushed back to his BMW and saw Gus about half a mile east on New Dock Road. Gus put out his arm to signal a left turn; it didn't matter about signaling because the Long Beach industrial area was more like a ghost town after quitting time.

Tim slowed to forty miles per hour and squealed around the corner. Gus was standing on the pedals and pumping hard. The bridge over the man-made water channel was arched so that ships could pass under for dry-docking for repairs. The ship yard was built and dredged at the same time the tunnel was put in under Navy Way Road, after the bombing of Pearl Harbor.

Two turns and about ten blocks uphill, Gus stopped in front of a church. Tim pulled to the curb and watched Gus get Missy from the red box and go up and knock on the rectory door. A gray-haired priest opened the door and shook his head side to side. Even from

half a block, Tim could see that the priest was saying no. Gus returned Missy to the box on the three-wheeler, turned it one hundred and eighty degrees, and pedaled right past the BMW. Tim acted as if he were adjusting the car radio to avoid eye contact.

Gus followed the same route, coasting since it was mostly downhill on the way back to his apartment. When Gus crested the arched bridge, Tim sped up and lined Gus up with the BMW emblem on the hood*. I'll do a pit maneuver using the metal box. That three-wheeler will flip up and over the railing and crash down in the dry dock yard!* At the last moment, Tim yanked the steering wheel to the left. *Someone could get my license number!*

It took two days to find an old pickup with a front push bumper for sale on Craigslist. Tim paid cash and was diligent about wearing driving gloves. The weekend would be best since most of the Long Beach industrial area would be closed.

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Tim's hunch was right. The three-wheeler was in the parking lot of the Holy Family Church. Gus was one of the first parishioners to rush out. He got on the three-wheeler and started peddling like there was an emergency. After Gus turned the corner, he continued pedaling downhill toward the drydock bridge.

The old truck started shaking and was hard to control at fifty miles an hour. Tim knew it was now or never. The four-by-twelve wood bumper made contact with the dog box. Gus gripped hard on the handlebar brakes—it was useless! Tim steered toward a corner sidewalk and, at the last moment, stepped on the brake. The front wheel on the red trike dropped into a rain drain, and simultaneously hit the curb at fifty-plus miles an hour. Gus flew over the handlebars and hit a telephone pole headfirst. Tim heard the solid thud of Gus's head hitting the creosote-soaked pole. He chuckled, turned right onto Seaside Road, and never looked back. Augustine died instantly.

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Kevin was on the phone with Tina when the operator broke into their call. "Mr. Trask, sorry to break in. You have an emergency call."

"Mr. Trask, this is Officer Wallo of the Long Beach Police Department. There has been an accident."

Kevin went from initial shock to disbelief, then numbness and detachment, and finally to full, distressed shock. He called his parents in Mexico. Robert and Linda were equally disturbed. They felt terrible that Linda's cancer treatments would keep them from

coming home for a month or more. Robert informed Kevin that Grandpa Trask had purchased a grave site years ago when Gus's father had died. That Gus had kept everything in a red binder. Robert left the funeral arrangements up to Kevin. They both agreed to have a celebration of life service at Trask Inc in the future. The next call was even harder. This was the first time he ever heard Condi cry.

Identifying the body was surreal. It looked as though Gus was sleeping. The coroner had no reason to show Kevin the back side of the skull, where it was crushed inward. More than once, the coroner said that Gus died instantly and felt nothing. Kevin made it back home just before dusk. Maria made up a vase of fresh-cut flowers, with a rosary draped around it and a sympathy card from her and her dad. Kevin read the sympathy card asking about a Requiem Mass. *Maybe Maria and her dad can help me with the funeral mass? I know that they are practicing Catholics.*

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There was a dry-erase message on the whiteboard: **Call Tina ASAP**.

"Kevin, what happened? I've been waiting to hear back."

"Gus, our security guard, crashed on his way home from church this morning."

"Like, are you talking about that guy that rides that handicap three-wheeled bike?"

"Yes, it looks like he was coming down a hill too fast, the front wheel went into a storm drain, then hit a curb, and Gus went over the handlebars."

"Like, that would kill someone?"

"He hit a telephone pole straight on!"

"'Oh…"

Beep beep rang out from the intercom next to the wall phone. "Tina, I need to go see who is at the gate."

"Like okay. But don't try to call me until tomorrow evening. I'm starting my onboarding training for the Red Cross. They offered me a six-figure salary and even Super Bowl tickets. Like, I'm so excited to meet John Elway."

"Good for you, Tina. I'll call you tomorrow night." Kevin hung up.

From the marble front entry, Kevin spotted CP standing on the other side of the iron gate. Kevin went back into the foyer and hit a button on a security touchpad. The heavy gate slowly opened.

"Hey Bro, I'm so sorry," CP said as they approached each other. They hugged for the longest time. CP stepped back and scanned over the Trask home, set in the middle of two acres and impeccably

landscaped. The property was bigger than he'd imagined. "Why don't we go get a drink in Gus's honor?" CP suggested.

"That sounds good." Kevin jogged up the marble stairs and pulled the massive doors to the mansion closed, and then followed CP out to his spotless truck. They started sharing Gus's day-to-day routines. They laughed about how Gus could out-granny-shoot even the best free point shooters. But the one thing they kept coming back to was that Gus had resolute faith in Jesus and loved helping people more than helping himself.

It was past midnight when CP dropped Kevin off at the iron gate. The security system had automatically armed the main house and garage. Kevin meandered toward the back property. The underwater pool lights made for a mystical aqua blue steam drifting into the night sky. The tennis court metal roof, blended with the reflective top of the oversized cabana, brought his mother to mind. If Linda had stayed under UV protection and spent less time on outdoor tennis courts, she might not be in Mexico for experimental Melanoma treatment. No matter—mountain climbers, racers, stunt performers, thrill seekers, and so many more have the Do or Die spirit in their DNA and can't live a normal life.

Kevin pushed open the cabana curtains and crashed face-first on the king lounger. No sooner did he shut his eyes than a mental wakeup call smacked hard. W*hat happened to Missy? No one said anything about a puppy. If Gus was coming from church, maybe she ran off. There was a lot of foam in the box…*

It was too late to call the coroner. However, he had a business card for the Holy Family Church in the console. From the Range Rover, he dialed the church rectory.

The phone rang at least ten times. "Father John Murphy, how can I help?"

"John, this is Kevin Trask."

"Yes, Kevin, what's on your mind in the wee hours of the morning?"

"When we talked, you said that Gus was going home from church."

"Yes, he was. He didn't even stay for coffee and donuts."

"Did he bring a puppy to church?" Kevin asked anxiously.

"No, he came by Saturday with Little Missy. I told him that it would not be a good idea to bring a puppy to Mass unless it was a service dog and potty-trained."

"Thanks, John! I'll see you Tuesday when we plan Gus's funeral."

"No worries, Kevin. The church ladies will do most of the work."

On Interstate 5, Kevin headed toward Long Beach, doing almost ninety miles an hour. This was the fastest he had ever made it to Trask Inc. He parked at the security gate and ran across the

asphalt in the dark. He tripped over a parking bumper and almost did a nose-plant. Gravel embedded in his hands and knees. He hobbled to the apartment door and looked through the small window next to the door. It was dark inside. He put his ear to the glass and listened—nothing.

Kevin went out back to the junk metal pile and found a rusty old brake drum. On the right side of the apartment door, he two-handed frisbee-tossed the drum at the tempered window. Hundreds of small square pieces imploded inward—not a sound. He pushed the glass off a table, crawled through, and found a light switch. There in the oversized dog bed, Missy looked up at him with the same blind look she had when he saw her in the cardboard box at the ranch in Madras. Kevin picked up Little Missy and felt her tiny heart pattering. "I'll never abandon you," Kevin affirmed.

The walls seemed to reply with the words, "Roger that."

Chap 37—————Overnight Soulmate

The pre-funeral meeting went well. Kevin was okay with Father John Murphy doing a standard funeral mass and agreed to be one of the pallbearers. Kevin declined to speak at the service and told Father John that there would be a celebration of life at a later date. Kevin had never felt this kind of guilt and confessed to Father John that it was his fault for giving Gus the puppy, which made Gus hurry home from church.

The frail priest listened and offered Kevin a drink of Irish whiskey. "Look here, son," Father John softly spoke. "God doesn't want the passing of your good friend and brethren in spirit to be the beginning of a pity-party. There's enough culpability to go around. I was the one who told Gus that he couldn't bring a dog into a church." Father Murphy reached down to pet Missy. She licked his hand and rolled over to have her belly rubbed.

"I know John, but I had an alternate motive for giving her to Gus…"

Father John listened and consoled with Kevin for at least an hour. Kevin brought up the guilt he was feeling about selling off Trask Manufacturing. This private information hit home because many Holy Family Church parishioners worked at the trailer manufacturing plant. "Well, John, I guess I've taken enough of your time." Kevin stood up and extended his hand.

Father John stood and offered Kevin a blessing, then said, "One last thing, young man. Trust that God is in control. It can feel daunting, but try to put your trials in His hands." Father John went to his desk to work on Gus's eulogy. Missy followed Kevin out of the rectory, down the sidewalk, and across the parking lot to the Range Rover. When Kevin picked her up, she nuzzled her small pink and black nose under his chin.

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Kevin was at the church forty-five minutes early, and the parking lot was filling up. It looked like at least fifty Trask employees were there. Four of the players from the Sparks city league basketball team were there, along with kids and young adults that Gus had helped in Sunday school. Kevin stood outside with Missy. She was a great comfort for Kevin and was getting loved on by attendees.

Condi was there with her son, Ali, and both her parents. Patty was next to them and saving two places for CP and Kevin. At five minutes to ten, Kevin put Missy into the back of the Range Rover, which could now have passed for a playroom at a five-star dog resort. CP, Kevin, and four other pallbearers brought the casket from the hearse into the church. The funeral mass had a satisfying, ritual feel, but not the closure that Kevin was hoping for. Father Murphy approached the podium and took a rosary from his pocket, along with a three-page eulogy.

"God knew the name Augustine Donald Watt before He created the universe. And Gus was made special. Everyone who got to know Gus knew about Gus's love of superheroes." Father Murphy held up the Rosary. "This was one thing that Gus struggled with."

"Praying to a woman is idolatry!" Spurned out from the back of the church.

Almost everyone ignored the blasphemer except Father Murphy. "Most major faiths use some form of prayer beads to meditate and pray by. The Rosary put Augustine's mind into lockdown and caused Gus a life of distress early on. You see, sometime in the last twenty centuries, five prayers were added to the recitation of this prayer rope. But for some unknown reason, the five additional beads for those prayers did not get added. Gus had the hardest time with this, no beads to pray the Glory Be…"

A balled-up reflex spurted out of Kevin, "The 'Glory Be' is a doxology, not a prayer."

"Well, Ah… I think you might be right, Mr. Trask," came back from the podium.

Calling out the name 'Mr. Trask stirred up a commotion among the attendees who didn't know, but now did, that Kevin was an heir to one of Long Beach's largest employers.

A few brethren spoke about Gus, and the last person was a face Kevin recognized. The full-bearded, tattooed giant with a black leather vest came to the podium to speak. "We all have lost a great friend with the passing of Gus. But I lost more than a great friend. I lost my sponsor. Gus helped me stay sober for the last nine years. Every morning when I'd pull up to the security gate, Gus would tell me he prayed that the gargoyle stayed off my back." A few people chuckled, not fully understanding the historical reference. "Maybe monkey on my back is a better phrase to use?"

Tears started running down the wind-beaten, leathery face of this beast of a man. He gained his composure and went on. "I did fall off the wagon a few times over the years, but it didn't matter to Gus. There was never any judgment or shame from Gus. I'd pull up to the security gate on my Harley, and Gus would know. He'd say that he would ask Saint Matthias, the patron saint of alcoholics, to pray with him for me. Gus was my superhero, mentor, and Brethren."

The church service ended with Father Murphy instructing anyone who wanted to attend the final blessing at the grave site to line up behind the hearse and turn on their lights. Kevin jockeyed into the procession line, then opened the lift gate to give Missy some fresh air. Kevin had never owned a dog. He was unaware of how to board a puppy.

A woman in a black dress, long-sleeved sweater, and large package approached from behind. "I'm fairly sure here in California you'd be arrested for leaving an animal locked up in a car."

Kevin spun around. "Lilly, what are you doing here?"

"The coach and football players made a plaque for Gus. Coach asked me to deliver it and make sure…"

The procession line started to move. Kevin snatched Missy out of the crate. "Can you ride up to the grave site with me?"

Lilly set the large package in the back of the Range Rover. "What about your girlfriend?"

"Tina couldn't make it. She's on assignment back East." Kevin looked at the long line of cars waiting. He handed off Missy and hurried them up the passenger's side. After opening the door, Lilly slipped into the seat. Missy circled, balled up Lilly's dress, and finally nuzzled deep into her lap.

"She probably smells her brother," Kevin said, taking notice that most of Lilly's legs got exposed.

Lilly wondered what the 'smells her brother' comment meant. She remembered when Kevin once asked about waxing her legs. Kevin looked over again. "Thanks for being here. I have never felt so alone without Gus."

"I know your loneliness, Kevin. I'm here for you." Missy quit sniffing and lay on Lilly's lap.

"Maybe the scent of her sibling is lingering on your dress."

"You mean from Spooner?"

"You're holding the runt from the litter. That is where I got the Saxton's Aussie from."

"Really," Lilly replied and took note of Missy's small stature and cloudy blue eyes.

"Yes, really," Kevin replied, then looked forward. "I like that name. How big is Spooner now?"

"He's about three times as big as this little girl. I think it's all the venison jerky Dad feeds him. He is already training Spooner to herd."

"Herd? Your family doesn't ranch."

"Dad wants to train Spooner to herd anybody out of the way when he's felling a tree."

"Wow, that makes sense. That rancher in Madras said that Aussies need a job."

"What kind of job are you going to find for Missy?"

"I took her on a hike this week to clear my head, and she was great. Being half blind and hard of hearing seems to have made her the perfect dog for my future trekking trips."

"What is this trekking goal you have plans for?" Lilly asked with genuine interest.

Kevin went into detail that after June, when Trask Inc. was sold, he planned to do the Snowman Trek in Bhutan. Lilly remembered that her brother always dreamed of climbing in the Himalayas. A goal out of reach for the common class, where a climbing permit can be thousands of dollars.

CP and the other four pallbearers were waiting at the back of the hearse. Kevin jogged up the curved cemetery road, past cars and motorcycles. He gripped the cold brass handrail and helped carry Gus's casket to be entombed between his parents. Father Murphy spotted Lilly keeping a respectable distance, holding Missy in her arms. She knew dogs in graveyards marking places would be disrespectful.

"Young lady, come forward." Lilly looked around. Surely the old priest wasn't going to single her out for holding a dog in a cemetery. "Yes, you, young lady!" Now the entire group was looking at Lilly, opening a path for her.

Father Murphy exchanged the holy water pail for Missy. He cautiously placed Missy on the casket. Missy rested her head on her tiny front legs. The priest sprinkled Holy Water over the casket, Missy, and then the crowd as a finale blessing, and Condi sang Gus's favorite song, 'Amazing Grace'.

The group dissipated fairly rapidly. Closure for Kevin wasn't even close. He'd lost the red binder that Gus had given to him—he'd never even checked to see what the contents held. Without a will, and since Gus's domicile was on the Trask property, no legal action would be required.

"Are you okay?" Lilly asked as Kevin stood silent, gazing down at three headstones all lined up in a row.

"Yeah, I think so. He always talked about his mother never holding him. But it just feels like I'm missing something."

"Maybe the plaque the White Buffalo boys made can be hung where he lived. That might help with closure." Lilly squeezed

Kevin's hand. "I'm sure that he's in his mother's arms," Lilly said, just above a whisper.

"I hope so." Kevin turned and looked back over his shoulder. Most of the cars and motorcycles were gone. "Lilly, would you like to go play a game of golf?"

"What? Ah… Sure, Kevin, if that makes you feel better."

"Gus and I used to play golf when I was in middle school. Actually, Gus was a pretty good player."

Back in the SUV, Lilly held Missy on her lap and told Kevin that she was flying standby and that the last flight out of LAX was just after nine. Her once-stewardess mom warned that being there early was essential or risk spending a night at the airport. Kevin wasn't paying attention; he was trying to remember where to turn. It had been at least ten years since he'd been to Gus's favorite course.

"It seemed so much bigger when I was a kid." Kevin parked in front of the Putt-Putt fun center.

Lilly let out a sigh of relief. "I've only played regular golf a few times. But for sure, I can beat you at miniature golf."

"You're on! And what would you like to wager?" Kevin leaned over and took Missy off of Lilly's lap. His hand accidentally felt the warmth of Missy's against Lilly's dress.

"I still owe you a guided steelhead trip. Now that I know you plan to start hiking. I'll bet you a pair of Danner hiking boots. I'll even throw in a handful of boot grease."

"Okay, you're on!" Kevin opened the door and slipped out with Missy. He didn't know what the boot grease was about.

Lilly met them at the hood of the SUV. "Wait a second, what do I get if I win?"

"That's not going to happen." Kevin held the door open for Lilly to enter the fun center.

There was a brief discussion about dogs on the course. Lilly said that she'd clean up any mess if needed, while Kevin handed the clerk fifty dollars. Missy's vision was good enough to track the bright colored golf balls against the lime green artificial grass. Kevin's gaze tracked Lilly's black dress each time it crept up as she straddled the red golf ball and rocked her hips. Lilly felt his peeks and didn't mind—the innocent flirting was a welcome distraction.

At the windmill hole, Kevin was already three strokes behind. "If you make this shot in two strokes, I'll buy you dinner."

"You're on." Lilly teed her ball. Kevin again glanced at her firm legs centered over the red ball. *Tick… Clunk*, Lilly's ball hit a windmill blade. Missy trotted across the green artificial grass, picked up the ball, and brought it back to the tee. "Looks like I get a do-over."

"No do-overs. Now, you owe me dinner." Kevin said with a smile.

"That sounds good. I'm starved." Lilly bent over and picked up the slobber-covered ball. "We should probably leave now. I need to be at the airport no later than eight."

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Kevin headed north toward Pasadena. "I know that a country club is probably not a place that you would choose for dinner. But they will do baby or dog sitting for members."

"No, that sounds fine. But my limit on dinner is a hundred dollars," Lilly replied and then rubbed her nose against Missy's.

Kevin used his cell phone to call the Pasadena Country Club. Being a Trask didn't require a reservation, but checking in Missy would. The valet was ready with a cart to roll Missy in her crate into a back room.

Lilly removed her long-sleeved sweater; her bare, muscular shoulders got as many glances as did her firm legs. Kevin commented that she was in good shape, like his mom. Lilly asked about Linda, and Kevin shared that the new melanoma treatments in Mexico were showing positive results. Then Kevin asked about her mom's arthritic hip, which was more positive news. Lilly sincerely thanked Kevin for putting her parents on the Trask Inc. health insurance plan. Kevin scoffed and gave all that credit to Patty.

A few club members came over to their table and introduced themselves. Lilly felt accepted with the genuine introductions. Someone sent over a bottle of champagne. After dinner, one of the older widowed members came over and pulled Kevin out onto the dance floor. Lilly smiled as she watched Kevin skillfully lead the distinguished woman, an heir to William Randolph Hearst, around the dance floor. The diamond around her neck was worth more than a million dollars. Lilly kept glancing at her watch—time was running short.

"I'm returning your young prince," the stylish woman said, "but it would do my old heart good to see him dance with you, young lady."

Lilly didn't have a choice. Kevin took her by the hand and led her to the center of the floor. She stopped looking at her watch after their third dance and second glass of champagne.

Missy was sound asleep when the valet loaded the dog crate into the back of the Range Rover. Lilly pulled her sweater up over her shoulder while the valet opened the passenger door for her. "Have a good evening, Mr. Trask," he said and waved across the SUV.

Kevin sat silent for the longest time as he checked himself after two and a half glasses of wine. "I'm sorry that you missed the last flight. I can get you a motel close to the airport, or you can stay in our guest room. My parents are in Mexico; you would have the whole house to yourself."

"I'll take the guestroom offer," Lilly said, and then rested her head against the passenger window and nodded off. She'd been up most of the previous night to catch the 4:10 AM flight out of PDX.

The clunking of the iron gate stirred her from the needed slumber. She carried Missy behind Kevin and put her in the crate.

"You know where the guest room is." Kevin pointed across the foyer toward the hall.

"My PJs are in the rental car."

"I'll see if I have something in my apartment." Kevin was also exhausted, and he meandered to his room above the garage. He dug around and found his Blue Devil championship Jersey and some boxer-briefs. From the top of the stairs, he saw Lilly standing close to the pool, silhouetted against the white curtains surrounding the cabana.

"Will this work? Kevin held out the Blue Duke Jersey."

"That will work," Lilly answered and walked to the edge of the pool. "Is it okay if I go for a midnight swim?"

"Sure, go ahead. I'll go get you a towel," Kevin headed for the changing room and returned with a bathrobe and a couple of plush white towels. The black dress lay on the diving board, and so did the undergarments. Lilly swam from the shallow end to the deep end as Kevin put the towels next to her clothes.

"Does the water make my boobs look bigger?"

Kevin looked down, then back up, and gently replied, "I think so."

"Well, why don't you jump in and take a closer look?"

"Ah… Ah… That probably wouldn't…"

"I thought this was the infamous skinny-dipping pool," Lilly said as she let loose of the edge of the pool and backstroked toward the shallow end.

Kevin lost all self-control. The all-day glances and harmless flirting boiled over. He kicked off his shoes, stripped off his clothes, dove in, and came up at the other end of the pool. He cupped his hand on Lilly's shoulders, lifted and turned her, then kissed her as he'd never kissed anyone before. Lilly pushed away and teased with the words. "If you can beat me to the deep end of the pool, you can kiss anywhere you desire."

The fun and enjoyment were beginning. They played and then slept, played more, and slept under the cabana until the sun pushed away this night that was destined not to be mused over, talked or thought about now and forever…

Lilly was already regretting what she had desired for so long, knowing it would never come to fruition. She slipped out from the cabana and into the dressing room to shower. All the hot water couldn't cleanse what she was feeling.

Kevin pushed the shower curtain open. "Is it okay if I join you?"

Lilly tried to say 'no', but couldn't get the word out. "Yes, I wish you would."

Kevin watched Lilly as she dried off and dressed. "There should be coffee and bagels somewhere in the kitchen. Fresh fruit and orange juice should be in the fridge. Just help yourself."

"That sounds great. I'll also take little Missy out."

"I'll be in the study. I was supposed to call Mom and Robert after the funeral."

"Sorry, I hope I didn't mess up your plans."

"You didn't." Kevin's mischievous smile turned somber. "I just have this feeling that I should have said something at the funeral yesterday. Or maybe—it's what I didn't do for Gus?" Kevin looked skyward as though he owed Gus an apology.

Lilly entered the mansion through the kitchen servant's door. Kevin entered through the study's French doors, plopped behind the antique governor's desk, and dialed Mexico. "Kevin, thanks for calling. Your mother is still sleeping. They gave her some strong pain meds. How'd the funeral go?"

"It went okay. I was surprised at how many people were there. Three people from the manufacturing floor eulogized Gus. Condi sang Amazing Grace."

"Did you say anything?"

"No, but now I wish I had said something. But the issue of getting Gus to move off-site and then misplacing the red binder is bothersome."

"Do you think you lost it at work or at home?"

"Last place I recall seeing it was on the front seat of the concept car."

"Did you have the top down? Could it have blown out?"

"Don't know." Kevin heard noise from the foyer. "Give Mom my love when she wakes up. I'll call you from work tomorrow."

Missy was in her crate, and Kevin spotted a folded piece of paper wedged under the handle. Kevin opened the paper.

> **Kevin, I'm sorry for last night. I left before Marie came to work, so this will always be just between you and me. I would feel terrible if Tina found out about something that had happened spontaneously. It wasn't planned or intended to hurt or change your relationship with Tina. Many times, I've**

pointed out that we come from different backgrounds. Now, we both need to go on with our separate lives. Thank you for always making me feel special.

Your friend, Lilly

There was noise coming from the kitchen. *Great, Lilly is still here!* Kevin dashed across the foyer into the kitchen; the bathrobe flew open.

"Good morning," Marie said as she hung her jacket on a hook next to the service door.

"Marie, did you see a taxi or airport shuttle out front?" Kevin asked anxiously.

"No, are you expecting someone?"

"Ah… well, not really." Kevin went mum.

"You might want to close up the robe. You're hanging out like a worm out of an apple." Maria pointed and then winked.

Kevin pulled the robe closed. "Marie, did you ever see or find a red binder lying around here?"

"I found a red binder under your bed months ago. It had plans for filling in a pool at your work. There were many details, so I quit looking."

"What did you do with it?"

"It felt real and important, so I put it in the fireproof vault in the study."

"Do you think it's still there?"

"I'll go check." Maria left the kitchen.

Kevin started a pot of coffee. Maria returned, hip pushed him aside, and handed him a three-ring binder. It was the red binder that Gus gave him when Nick Icorn came down in the worn-out motor home. Kevin stood at the counter and flipped through the pages. At the very back, he found something that would require a lawyer's hand.

"Kevin, have you been running around the house half-naked?" Marie asked.

Kevin pulled the robe closed again. "No, I went for a midnight swim and then slept in the Cabana to clear my head."

"I'll go tidy up the Cabana and bathhouse. Then make you breakfast."

Gus had numbered a very detailed final wish list. His superhero book collection was to be sold to pay for a remodel of the Navy training room. In one of the plastic sleeves, Gus left a ten-thousand-dollar United States Savings bond to Condi for her son, Ali. There was a second savings bond for the Holy Family church. Whatever proceeds that were left were to go for Autism research.

Kevin wasn't sure, but had a hunch that these penciled, detailed, numbered lines, although not notarized, constituted a last will. *These instructions could mess up the sale of Trask Inc.*

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Kevin had Missy in the side yard when Maria approached. "I'll put your clothes and shoes in the apartment."

"Thanks," replied Kevin, not looking up from the binder. When Marie got to the foot of the steps, Kevin yelled. "I need you to do something special for me."

Marie hung his pants over the railing and placed the Italian shoes on the landing. She returned and pulled a pad and paper from her work apron. "Okay, what is it?"

"I need you to send flowers. I was thinking lilies, but I'm not sure if that would be tacky?"

"Carnations are nice this time of year. Or Tina might like a big floral arrangement." Marie knew that just flowers would piss off Tina.

"They are not for Tina. They're for Lilly."

"Oh, I get it, lilies for Lilly. You're right, that would be tacky. I'd suggest long-stemmed roses."

"What color?"

"White or red would be good."

"How about a dozen of both?"

"Kevin, that would be showing off. Just a dozen red roses would be good."

"Okay, sign it, 'Yours truly from a good friend,' or maybe just don't put anything."

"Tacky again. Don't worry, I'll take care of it." Maria turned away to hide the girly-girl smile and thought. *I'll sign it—*

YOUR SOULMATE FOREVER.

Chap 38—————Tons of concrete

The countdown started… February, March, April, May, or in 120 days, and Kevin would have his freedom. But first. Gus's last wishes in the red binder had to be carried out precisely; the slightest deviation could put things into probate court for years and kill the Trask sale. The superhero magazine collection brought in $102,000 and posed a big problem.

Kevin stayed put on the third floor with Condi in the President's office and Patty outside her doors as HR director and Kevin's personnel assistant. CP phased out the every-other-week logging with the Saxtons. Being home with a new wife kept the testosterone and estrogen at reasonable levels. Patty was thankful not to have a road-warrior husband who worked 966 miles from home twice a month. Her friendship with Lilly was solid yet dwindling to less than a couple of phone calls a week.

"What do you think? Can we finish the remodel before June first for less than a hundred and two thousand dollars?" Keven asked, while arm motioning for CP to come all the way in to the crow's nest.

"Depends on the price of concrete. If Gus's calculations are correct, we're talking about eighty-five yards of concrete to plug the lateral tunnel. That pour should set for at least thirty days. The second pour, to fill the training pool, is almost 300 yards. Since it won't be underwater, it should set solid in less than two weeks."

Kevin moved away from the one-way glass and sat down behind the desk.

"Can't we just start dumping concrete into the existing training pool and let it harden?"

"And where do you think all the water is going to go?" CP asked.

"Back out into the Long Beach Harbor."

"How about all over the manufacturing floor! The concrete would never harden, plus all the lime in that much concrete would pollute most of the harbor."

"What are you telling me? That the plug can't get done?" Kevin asked with panic.

"No, I'm not saying that. I've been following Gus's plans, and so far so good."

"Is there something you can do to speed things up?" Kevin asked in a panic. "It looks to me that Gus has some stuff repeated. Remember how he always double-checked the doors at night? Maybe he made things too complicated?"

Immediately, CP replied in defense. "Gus's plans are simple and absolutely brilliant."

"How's that?" Kevin rubbed his forehead.

"Think of it like a giant toilet bowl. You stuff something like an orange down the toilet to clog it. Then you pump the water out. Next, you fill the entire toilet bowl with concrete. If you can think of a better plan, let me know," CP said in a scolding voice.

"So, that is what the first eighty-five yards of concrete is for? To plug up the side tunnel?"

"You got it. The huge rubber bladder, for which Gus had all the details, will be in place next week during an outgoing tide. It will work like the orange getting stuck in a toilet. During the slack tide, they'll pump concrete into the bladder, and then we wait a month for the concrete to set."

"You're right, Gus was brilliant," Kevin replied.

"No kidding." CP agreed.

"I recall that Nick Icorn said a young boy drowned in that side tunnel at the beginning of World War Two," Kevin said.

"That's probably why Gus knew to use the outgoing tide to suck the bladder into the lateral tunnel. Whoever drowned back in the day in some strange way is still there."

"That's probably true," Kevin replied and paused to show respect. "CP, it's important that this project gets completed ASAP and for under a hundred thousand dollars."

"Roger that!"

"I know you will. Any money left over, Gus wants to go toward Autism research."

There was a knock at the door, and then it opened. Patty stuck her head in the office. "What are you two doing up here?"

"Oh, we're talking guy stuff. Building things and stuff like that," CP answered.

Patty frowned. "I thought you two would be up here lying to each other about who was the better basketball player."

"We already know who that is," Kevin quipped with a smile.

"Kevin, a congressman called twice. He knows Lilly and said he'd like to ask you something." Patty walked into the office and handed Kevin a Post-it note with a private phone number.

"Thanks." Kevin stuck the Post-it on his desk lamp.

"Did you tell Kevin?" Patty looked toward CP, glowing with unspoken joy.

"No, I thought you wanted to keep it a secret until our next doctor's appointment."

"Oh, I'm sure Kevin can keep a secret." Patty had an ear-to-ear smile and then blurted out, "We're pregnant."

"Wow! That was fast. Congratulations."

"We'd like you to be a godparent." CP extended his hand toward Kevin.

"It would be an honor." Kevin shook CP's hand. "You know, Kevin would be a good baptismal name."

"It would be okay for a boy," Patty replied. "But we like Augustine, that name works for a boy or girl."

"That's cool," Kevin replied. A three-way hug followed the announcement of a new life. CP and Patty shared their commitment to one of them being a stay-at-home parent. Kevin reached down and picked up Missy. "It's not that hard raising a child." They all laughed, then Patty and CP left the Crow's Nest.

Kevin dialed the private number on the Post-it and left a message. Congressman Lyle Haskell returned the call within five minutes. "Mr. Trask, thanks for calling. Lilly told me that you hike all over the world." A deep, gravelly voice came through the phone.

"Not yet. But I plan to start trekking this summer, starting in June. My hiking might be limited to North America at first." Kevin replied in the deepest masculine voice he could force through the phone.

"I'd like to make you a proposal. The same as I did to Lilly on one of our fishing guide outings."

"Okay…" Kevin's throat knotted. "I'm listening." Kevin listened to the Congressman and Army Ranger explain his organization that helps men and women who served in combat focus on outdoor activities like fishing, camping, and so forth. Kevin's part could be called 'Walk Off the War' or something like that.

Kevin immediately bonded with Lyle and committed to doing something as soon as Trask Inc. got sold. Kevin never served in the Armed Forces, but this sounded like a good way to give back to the country that made so much possible for his family. It was hard to admit, but Kevin could see why Lilly was involved with the congressman. Lyle Haskell was the real deal.

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The air tools and loud sounds in the plant didn't faze Missy, who followed two steps behind Kevin to the backyard to do her business. *Missy would be the perfect dog for trekking with veterans. I should take her on the Timberline Trail to see how she does on an overnight hike. Maybe I'll stop by and say 'Hi' to Lilly and wish her well? But if Tina comes along, it's probably not a good idea.*

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By March, rumors and construction in the old Navy training room drove production to record levels. The consensus and speculation were that Trask Inc. was expanding. In the first week of March, a line of concrete trucks took turns hooking up to a concrete pumper. Where all that concrete went was one of the unanswered questions floating around the assembly line. The Navy scuba training pool was a secret fifty years ago and was still known to only a few people. Mr. Hung Meng was one of them.

The custom twelve-by-twelve-foot bladder got filled with eighty-five yards of concrete, exactly to Gus's calculation. There was a 48-hour make-or-break wait to see if the concrete hardened inside the bladder. Two employees snuck through the safety-wire fence, and CP caught them trying to open the double doors. He called Kevin and left a voicemail. "Hey, Bro, can you come down to the Navy training room?"

A few minutes later. "What's up, CP?"

"A couple of employees were sniffing around. Trying to see what we're up to. Do you want Condi to get involved and fire them?"

"I don't know?" Kevin answered and rubbed at his chin. "Terminating someone for being curious is kind of harsh." Kevin walked toward the empty training pool and ducked under the yellow caution tape. "Wow! That's a long way down."

CP stopped at the tape. "Yeah, that's one deep hole."

Kevin noticed something at the bottom and pointed. "Look down there!"

CP got down on his hands and knees, and Horsey walked to the ledge. "Looks like a flattened can or putty knife." CP moved back from the pool lip.

"You got a flashlight?" Kevin asked.

"Yeah!" CP pulled one from his tool belt. "Here."

Kevin shone the light on the flat, shiny piece of metal; a reflection flashed back. "You got a ladder in here?"

"Not long enough to go way down there."

"I'll bring in a climbing rope and rappel down tomorrow."

"You're nuts! No one will be here." CP said and backed up further, then stood up.

"It could be a coin from around 1942, when the tunnel was put in. It might be worth millions of dollars." Kevin bantered and handed the flashlight back to CP.

"Bro, I still would not climb down there. I'm acrophobic!"

"You need to go mountain climbing with me."

"Like hell I do. I don't have that do-or-die gene like you white folk. Plus, I'm going to be a dad."

"I get it!" Kevin headed for the double doors where Missy had stayed put. He squeezed through the temporary safety fence panels. A few of the workers stopped and peered through the chain link fence. "What's going on in there?" one of the workers asked.

"We're cleaning up. With all of the mold problems these days, we decided to fill in the old Navy training pool. Then seal and paint the walls. We might have the old lockers redone, if we don't run out of money."

"I thought I smelt something musty. Glad you're getting rid of the mold."

Kevin's answer satisfied the three workers. They now had another accolade to spread and hoped that the remodeling was a good sign.

From the crow's nest, Kevin called Tina. It was almost noon in the Eastern Time Zone.

"Hi, Kevin. Like, I can't talk too long. I have an important lunch meeting."

"It sounds like you have really found your fit there at the Red Cross."

"Yeah, like it's going great. Next weekend I'm flying down to Puerto Rico to see the damage from Hurricane Hugo."

"Hurricane Hugo? That happened years ago when I was a freshman at Gonzaga. Why go to Puerto Rico now?" Kevin asked with skepticism

"A like, I'm not too sure. It must be a follow-up or check-up to see how the Red Cross money helped the natives. I do PR stuff, not looking over expense accounts. My boss does that stuff."

"Hey sexy, you ready for lunch?" Tina snapped her hand over the mouthpiece.

"Who's that?" Kevin asked.

"Oh, it's one of the guys on my team. Larry is always fooling around. Larry is old enough to be my dad." Tina waved her arm at Larry to go away.

"I'll call you when I get back." Tina abruptly hung up.

That's weird. Tina sounded distracted. Who's this Larry guy?

Kevin headed down the stairs and led Missy behind the half-circular counter. "Patty, could you watch Missy? Condi is not that big on dogs, especially at work."

"Of course." Patty lifted Missy onto her lap.

Kevin knocked on what could have been his office. "Is it a good time to go over a few things?" Kevin waved the red binder.

"Sure, Kevin, come in." Condi stood and motioned for Kevin to take a seat in front of her desk.

They discussed the earnest money receipt and the pending land sale contract. Hung Meng's first line item was that there were no last-minute capital improvements that could be expensed on the final profit-and-loss statement. Kevin was most concerned about voiding the land sale contract. Condi assured Kevin that if that happened, the entire million dollars would go directly to him and Robert Trask. Something didn't feel right, but Kevin trusted Condi. He just wanted to be done with all the backstabbing deal-making.

"Thanks, Condi." Kevin left the office.

"Thanks, Patty." Kevin took Missy from Patty and headed back down to check on where he could tie off a climbing rope. *Tina seems so distracted lately. I'm glad all this will be over on June first so we can get back together…*

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Saturday morning, there wasn't a car in the parking lot. The four-digit code didn't lift the new automatic gate. Kevin carried a pack with climbing equipment to the training room and unlocked the door. He uncoiled a blue 9.99mm rope, tied it to a forklift, and threw the other end into the empty, deep pit. He strapped on a seat harness between his legs and around his waist, then started talking to himself. "I can't remember if I tie a Munter hitch or a Clove hitch. One of those knots is known as the death knot."

"You're crazy!" CP said, walking through the two open doors. "I hope you're not on some type of Do or Die mission."

"I'm not. I want to retrieve that shiny object." Kevin pointed, then tied a Munter hitch into the carabiner and rappelled to the bottom of the empty pool. The shiny metal tag had a chain attached. Kevin shoved it into his pocket. The rope was too thin and slipped on the ascending block. Kevin yelled, "CP, backup the forklift and pull me up!" His voice echoed up and out from the hellhole.

CP slowly backed up until he saw Kevin's hands on the lip. Then Kevin pulled himself out of the hole and unsnapped the harness. "You're an idiot. What would you have done if I hadn't shown up?"

Kevin ignored the question, pulled the dog tag from his pocket, and rubbed the stainless steel with his thumb. The letters **B-A-Y-A-N-I B-I-A-N-C-H-I** slowly became readable.

"Wow, I wonder what kind of name that is?" CP said, watching Kevin's thumb remove more green slime.

"Filipino," Kevin replied. "I'll fill you in later. Right now, I have a plane to catch."

On the flight down to the port town of Ensenada and the Valle de Guadalupe area for a few days of wine tasting with his parents. Kevin used wet wipes to clean up the dog tag. Another memory of shiny metal flashed between his ears. Billy Saxton's crampon was hopefully still on the rim of Mt. Hood's crater.

After two days with his parents and antsy to start climbing again, Kevin made an appointment to meet Congressman Lyle Haskell. Lilly was right, he was the real deal—a decorated Army Ranger, with dark brown hair and eyes, and in rock-hard shape. Lyle was to men what Tina was to women. Kevin didn't ask Lyle about his relationship with Lilly. After their meeting, Kevin thought, *I could fall for a guy like Lyle.*

Since being in the eastern time zone, Kevin's second stop was the regional office of the Red Cross in New York. "What are you doing here?" Tina asked from a desk just outside Larry Larkin's main office.

"I thought I'd surprise you. I took a week off, spent some time with my parents in Mexico, and now I'm here."

"Like, you should have called Kevin. I really have a busy schedule this week."

"How about I stay around and not bother you until the weekend?"

"Like… Ah…" Tina had plans to go to Larry's cabin in Vermont for some spring skiing. "Like, I have to work this weekend."

Kevin glanced around the small waiting area. "Do you work weekends?"

"Yeah, the Red Cross is all about disaster relief," Tina replied.

"But there's no disaster happening now, is there?"

"No, but there is a PR fundraiser retreat. I'm in charge of trying to improve the bad image and bad press the Red Cross has been getting over the Super Bowl party."

"How was meeting John Elway, the 1999 MVP?"

"That didn't work out." Tina broke eye contact. There had been a disgusting after-game party at a strip club with Larry and some of his corporate sponsors, which she wanted to forget.

Kevin wasn't stupid. He felt the brush off... He went back to the United States Capitol Building and took Lyle Haskell up on an overnighter. This campout with veterans turned out to be just what Kevin needed. Sitting around a campfire and listening to some of

the soldiers share what they were dealing with was humbling. By the end of the week, Kevin was fully supportive of helping veterans walk off the war. In less than two months, the Trask Legacy would be over, and Kevin would have a new, meaningful mission on the horizon.

Back home on Tuesday morning was the next-to-last land-sale meeting. From a window, Kevin watched a chauffeur's arm punch in numbers on the keypad; the new automatic orange bar lifted. The black limo parked, and Mr. Hung Meng's squad of four followed. *I'm glad all this will be over soon.*

"Good morning, Kevin," Condi said as she entered the conference room and walked to the far end of the table.

Kevin turned from the window. "Good morning. How is Ali doing these days?"

"Ali's doing okay, but he wants to go camping and fishing this summer. Since I will be looking for work, we probably can't make that happen."

Kevin was sorry that he had asked.

"Good morning, Kevin," Patty said as she entered the room. She immediately started placing copies of the land sale contract around the table.

"How are you feeling? Are you eating for two these days?" The frown Kevin got from both Patty and Condi made it clear not to ask those brainless questions.

Mr. Meng entered, followed by his interpreter, accountant, and two other men, and stated, "You save money with no idiot at the gate."

Condi and Patty glared in unison like mother hens.

"What did you say?" Kevin demanded clarification.

"No guard at gate. Save your payroll by outsourcing with a robot arm." Mr. Meng replied and took a chair while puffing out his chest. "He was idiot. Dumb and mute. Not have good brain."

The interpreter jumped in. "There's no good Chinese word that translates to the mentally ill."

"Yes, there is," Patty jumped in. "The word would be gifted."

"Are you saying that the dead security guard had special talents?" The interpreter asked.

"You bet he did!" Kevin slid the red binder across the table. "Take a look at these remodeling plans. The subcontractor can't believe how Gus came within a half yard of the concrete for filling the tunnel and training pool."

The word *tunnel* exploded in Mr. Meng's dense head. "No money to do a remodel. Can't do! Look in the contract. Not allowed!"

"Remodeling expenses are allowed!" Kevin fired back. "Gus, the guy you just called an idiot, left these detailed plans to remodel the old musty training room adjacent to his apartment."

"Can't remodel. Waste of my money. Against our deal. No work on building!"

"Too late!" Kevin pointed at the binder. "Gus left his own funds for the project. I would never have done it myself." Kevin walked toward the squad. "You lucky bastard… You ended up with a hundred-thousand-dollar improvement that Gus paid for!"

"You did a major improvement without informing us?" In a panicked tone, the interpreter put his hands on both sides of his head, then rested his elbows on the conference table, knowing his fate could be the CCP firing squad.

Kevin walked to the red binder and opened it to a page that had the notarized signature of **Augustine Donald Watt**. "By probate law, I had no choice."

A loud, heated discussion in Chinese imploded. Patty was writing down the conversation as fast as she could. Kevin and Condi could tell that there was a serious problem with Mr. Meng's squad.

"Kevin, why don't you show Mr. Meng the mold-free training room while Patty makes copies of all the remodeling invoices. The invoices will clearly show that all the expenses were paid from proceeds from Gus's will." Condi broke up the heated conversation and finger-pointing.

"Show remodel now!" Mr. Meng demanded.

Kevin led Mr. Meng and his entourage down the stairs out the front of the building, around to the west side, and through the safety fence panels. "CP, the new owners want to see the remodel."

CP opened the other side of the double steel doors—the sunlight shot rays of light across the new concrete floor. There was not even the slightest bump or mark where a pool once was. "The last pour of two hundred and ninety-six yards of concrete is still curing, but it's okay to walk on." CP motioned left to right with his arm.

"You know this room could be made into a full-sized basketball court," Kevin suggested as a positive note.

Mr. Meng glared inside! It did look like a huge gymnasium with a solid, new concrete floor and freshly painted walls. To think that he was beaten by an idiot sent him into a rage of words that not even his interpreter could understand. He had been outmatched by Gus, a simple person who lived and died for the good of people.

The Y2K mission to conceal radioactive suitcase bombs hidden under a super tanker in a mini submarine and then tunneled into the United States was thwarted before the new century rolled in. One million, six hundred and forty thousand pounds of concrete,

plus sketches by a JC superhero fan, made it happen, with the help of a communion of saints from above.

The squad of non-believing terrorists fell in line and marched out of the building, splitting between Kevin and CP.

"Or maybe put in a tennis court so you could work on your tennis game," Kevin rattled off as Mr. Meng and goons passed in between him and CP.

"You shouldn't piss off a guy like that!" CP warned Kevin as he rushed to a forklift. "Come raise the forks!"

As the evildoers approached the black limo, the trunk popped open. One of the five was forcefully shoved into the trunk. CP had witnessed similar incidents during Desert Storm.

"What do you see?" Kevin yelled from the forklift seat.

"Oh, nothing," CP yelled down.

Chap 39——————Gods will

Raw evil power is an immeasurable, unrestricted, and malevolent force that operates without moral constraints, seeking to destroy, dominate, or cause suffering through sheer magnitude. It is characterized by the unrefined nature, prioritizing brute force and coercion over strategy, precision, or ethics.

Tim Baylor was Hung Meng's student and ready to graduate. Date rape preceded choking out his victims. It was shooting Aiana in the chest and then between the legs that pushed Tim over the edge. Doing away with Officer Bull Elk had unexpectedly aroused him. Oddly, just the planning to eliminate a Trask was ticking in his skull twenty-four seven—it was super empowering.

Mr. Hung Meng had only shared the entire Y2K mission with Myung, and he was battling gang green in a detention camp in China's Xinjiang region. Tim had no clue about the mini-sub tunnel, nor that Gus's last wish had put Hung Meng's head on the CCP chopping block.

Out of sight, out of mind was Kevin's plan to stay away from Trask Inc. as much as possible. Gus's last wishes were fulfilled, and $7,500 remained for Autism research. The **Walk off the War** program was planning a camping trip in Yosemite sometime in May. Kevin was 100% committed to helping. All salaried managers, including hourly line foremen, would lose their livelihoods at Trask Inc. on June first. Helping veterans get their minds back on track also helped Kevin cope with grief over the Chinese buyout.

Tina's six-figure salary had been short-lived. She got caught up in the Red Cross public-relations sting and was one of the eighteen people who took a three-day Super Bowl trip on their Red Cross expense account. Her boss, Larry Larkin, took a plea deal and then threw her under the bus. He had a wife and two kids in college. Tina was looking for another meal ticket around Washington, D.C., but Larry leaked pictures of her dancing topless at the strip club after the Super Bowl.

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Two weeks before the Yosemite camping trip, Kevin stopped by Trask trailers to clean out his desk. It was sad not to see Gus in the guard shack. Kevin felt the cold shoulder from a few floor managers as he went upstairs to the half-circle HR counter. Patty came around the counter, and they hugged.

"You are getting big. What is it, four months?" Kevin spoke with guarded words.

"We're having twins!" Patty rubbed her belly.

"Ah… I guess that means I'll be a godparent times two."

"CP thinks it's great. He wants four kids. I got half that job almost done."

"Is CP going to keep working for Saxton Logging after you have your twins?"

"We're not sure. You know, with the pending sale, nobody knows what will happen when that bastard Hung Meng takes over. Oops…" Patty put her hand over her mouth. "I didn't mean to say that."

"No, that's okay. I called Hung Meng a bastard the first time I met him on a tennis court. Or maybe I called him a fat ass, no good cheater? Anyway, could you watch Missy?"

"Of course I can." Patty reached over the counter for the jar of dog treats.

"You wanted to see me," Kevin said from the half-opened door.

"Come on in. Pull the door closed behind you," Condi replied.

Kevin took a chair in front of the old desk that went back to when Grandpa Trask was running things. "You said it was urgent."

"Kevin, I think Mr. Hung Meng's people are trying to back out of the deal." Condi wasn't one to waste words.

"Why would they do that? Production is up, salaries are frozen, and we haven't expensed anything for the last ninety days." Kevin tried hard to keep his anger and disappointment under control. Something he was learning at the Veterans meetings.

Condi had the contract in her hands. "I don't know. But Meng's accountant won't take my calls. His lawyer said that they would like to push the closing date to the second week in June."

"Why would they want to push the date out when they were always in a hurry to close early?" He drew three deep breaths.

"Because on June third, the earnest money becomes null and void after the forty-eight-hour right to rescind cooling-off period."

"I thought this was a done deal!"

"Nothing's ever a done deal until the money is in the bank." Condi set the papers aside and looked at the day planner on her

desk. "Kevin, I have a meeting scheduled with our lawyers on Monday, May third. You should be here."

"Let me call Lyle the team leader, and I'll let you know."

Kevin picked up Missy and went up to the third-floor office. He'd usually go to the one-way mirror and look down at the workers, but for the last two months, he had avoided the crow's-nest view. Kevin pulled out the top center drawer and found one of Gus's laminated prayer cards with baby Jesus on the front. He turned it over and read the words.

> **Father, I abandon myself into your hands; do with me what you will. Whatever you may do, I thank you: I am ready for all, I accept all. Let only your will be done in me, and in all your creatures I wish no more than this, O Lord Into your hands I commend my soul: I offer it to you with all the love of my heart, for I love you, Lord, and so need to give myself, to surrender myself into your hands without reserve, and with boundless confidence, for you are my Father**

The words were daunting. Kevin put the card in the moving box, then reached to the back of the drawer and scooped items forward. His eyes locked onto a diamond necklace. *Where did this come from?* He scooped again when his fingers felt another chain he knew instantly. *At last! I found Grandpa's pocket watch*. Kevin opened the cover and read the inscription, '**Work for God'**. He made another wide sweep, and among pencils, pens, paper clips, gum, breath mints, rubber bands, a paper punch, rulers, and over ten dollars in loose change, he unraveled a dog tag from the pile. I still need to have this shipped to the Bayani Bianchi family in the Philippines. On the back of the tag was a '**C'**. *I wonder what the **C** stands for?*

Kevin stood up, clipped the pocket watch to a belt loop, and told himself, "*I hope I don't misplace or lose this again.*" He reached into the bottom of the white moving box, picked out the diamond necklace and dog tag.

"Come on, girl, let's go to lunch," Missy heeled down the stairs.

Patty looked up and asked. "How's the packing up going?"

"I think I'm done," Kevin replied and then held out the diamond necklace. "Where do you think this came from?"

Patty quickly glanced at the large pear-shaped 3-carat diamond and replied. "Isn't this the piece of costume jewelry Tina had on at Senator Byron's fundraiser we all went to?"

"Yeah, I think you're right." Kevin took back the necklace and handed over the dog tag. "Send this back to the Filipino family you shipped the comic books to after we went through Gus's stuff."

Patty took the dog tag and looked at it, and quickly stated. "Bayani was a Catholic."

"What, how do you know that?"

"It is the religious preference indicator, which is to ensure proper funeral rites or last rites in the event of a casualty." Patty set the Dog tag on the counter. "On CP's dog tag, there is a P."

"And that stands for what?"

"Protestant," Patty replied.

Some weird sensation came over Kevin, and he picked up the dog tag. "I'll take care of this."

"What about the necklace? Do you want me to mail it to Tina?"

"No, I'll take care of that too."

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The noon spring weather was pleasant. The bartender brought Kevin a double Cutty Sark. He wanted to say, 'Isn't it a little early?', but didn't. He also wondered how his business would be affected if Trask Trailers closed. He dropped a dog biscuit on the outside deck.

Kevin was already on the phone. "Tom, this is Kevin Trask."

"How are you doing, big guy? It's been a long time since we had our man talk. Remember I'm here for you."

"Thanks, Tom. I'm trying to get a hold of Tina. Can you help me out?"

"Yeah, she's incognito right now. Haven't you been following that Red Cross buying Super Bowl tickets for the important people?"

"Not really. But I have a diamond necklace of Tina's that I want to get back to her."

Tom muted the sound on his eighty-inch projection TV. "She's been looking for that, almost like her life depends on it."

"It's costume jewelry, Tom. I know what a diamond this size would cost. Remember Christmas and the earrings I bought for Tina?"

"Ah, okay…" Tom knew differently; he'd been offered twenty thousand dollars if he found the necklace. He had already tossed Tina's bedroom and searched her car three times. "Why don't you let me get it to her?"

"No! Just have her call me." Kevin hung up and flagged the bartender for another double.

Tom immediately called Tim Baylor.

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The office phone woke Kevin. "Kevin, it's Tina. She called three times when you were at lunch." *Click*… Patty switched lines.

Kevin pushed the blinking line 2 button. "Hey Kevin, I got your message!"

"That was quick." Kevin hiccupped and then finished, "I talked to your stepdad less than an hour ago. I'm glad Tom got the message to you."

"It was more like two hours ago, Kevin. Did you pass out?"

"No. I nodded off. I've been packing."

"It wasn't Tom. It was ___," Tina stopped herself…

"Who was it?" Kevin asked while belching up bourbon and taco sauce.

"Kevin, are you drunk?"

"I had a drink at lunch," Kevin lied.

"Like, with that tall skinny girl you go fishing with?"

"No, Lilly is doing her own thing, guiding congressmen and veterans these days."

"Oh, then maybe I can come pick up the diamond and give you a reward for finding it."

"What about your PR work for the Red Cross?"

"I quit that job. My boss was always hitting on me. I might file a sexual harassment suit." Tina was excited.

"So, you're back in San Diego?"

"Not yet, why don't you fly me into LAX. I'll make the reward really worth it for you, even better than Christmas Eve. Like I've really, really missed you."

"Yeah, I should do that," Kevin answered from the brain below his belt.

They talked for over two hours, Tina coaxed Kevin into some dirty talk, but Kevin was sobering up, and it felt weird. Maybe the pocket watch and dog tag were sending vibes of reverence for the flesh.

Patty knocked on the door. "I'm headed home. Is there anything that you need?"

Kevin twirled the necklace around his finger. "No, I'm good. Have a good evening."

Patty was disgusted with Kevin and now thought he might not be a good choice for a God Parent.

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That night, when Tina called Tim back, they made a plan to get the necklace back. Tim assured her that after Mr. Meng's diamond was returned, it would be safe for her to return to San Diego. She

did not share that after the hike, she and Kevin would get one of the romantic rooms in the main lodge. She'd take care of Kevin. In return, he could perhaps get her a PR position working with the new owners of Trailer Inc. Now that she had five months of experience, she was worth a six-figure salary.

It was almost midnight Eastern time. Tina knew this was a better time to call Kevin to finish their dirty talk. "Kevin, were you dreaming about me?"

"Ah… sort of. I was mainly getting my gear together."

"Why don't you have the Trask Jet come pick me up? You can become a member of the Mile-High Club. Do you want to hear what I'll do to you in the bathroom?"

"What?" Kevin was gradually evolving out of his college-prude image, but Tina wasn't aware that the Cessna Citation Mustang bathroom was nothing more than a small, non-belted seat with a bucket. It was an emergency non-flushing toilet and was not even enclosed, just a curtain for privacy.

"First, I'll unzip and make sure…"

"Tina, I'll have Patty get you a non-stop first-class ticket into PDX. I'll pick you up in Portland."

"Don't you want to hear about my plans for you?"

"Not now! I'm looking for the correct rope."

Tina was pleasantly surprised. "Like, that sounds fun. So, you're planning to tie me up. Tell me more," Tina expressed sultrily.

"Tina, I've got to go." Kevin planned to leave Tina at Silcox Lodge, go solo to Crater Rock, tie off a safety rope, and belay-walk backward to retrieve Billy Saxton's crampon.

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At 7:30 am, Kevin knocked on door 228 at the Holiday Inn on Airport Way. It took a second and third knock before Tina opened the door. "Sorry, I was using the hair dryer." Tina threw her arms around Kevin. "It's so good to see you, it's been a long time."

"How did you sleep last night?" Kevin asked and pecked Tina on the forehead.

"I would have slept better if you were next to me," Tina lifted on her toes, then kissed Kevin on the lips.

"We should get moving! We'll get some breakfast on the way. We need to be at Timberline Lodge before ten. It's only seventy miles."

"There's my pack and suitcase." Tina pointed at the lime-green pack and some other stuff on the bed, then walked into the hall. Kevin followed with his hands full.

When Kevin let down the tailgate, Tina got her first look at Missy. "What is wrong with that mutt? Its eyes are all cloudy."

"That's Missy," Kevin replied, setting the pack and suitcase next to the travel crate. "She was the runt of the litter. She's hard of hearing and can't see all that well."

"So like, why do you have a defective dog?"

"It's a long story. Do you want to hold her on the drive up to Mt. Hood?"

"No thanks," Tina hopped in and pulled down the visor mirror to check her hair.

They stopped for breakfast in Sandy, Oregon, at the Tollgate Inn. A place famous for Grandma's style of cooking. Kevin asked the owner to fix up a bowl of biscuits and gravy to go. When they passed through Zigzag, Kevin looked over at the fishing guide shop and didn't mention the Saxton name. Tina was also holding back the name Baylor. Tim had met her at the airport last night with the bright green pack and had shown her a special pocket with a lock. He instructed her to put the diamond necklace in that secret pocket. He didn't tell her that he had a tracker stitched into the bottom, under the trail mix, protein bars, and other stuff. Snacks that would make sure she'd take a drink from the stainless-steel water bottle in a side pocket.

Neither of them knew that Tim was tracking them in from the van he had rented under the business name Hung Meng Imports.

They made it to the Timberline Lodge parking lot before eleven. Kevin let down the tailgate on the Range Rover and helped Tina with her green pack. Then he attached a short rope to his fully loaded mountain pack and clipped the other end to Missy's collar.

"Like, you're not taking the mutt with us, are you?"

Kevin gave Tina the look. "Can I put her biscuits and gravy in your pack?"

"What for?" Kevin gave Tina the look again. "So, you can feed her at the warming hut while you are waiting."

Tina turned so Kevin could open her pack and put the to-go bag on top of the snacks. He put a small roll of green plastic poop bags in a side pocket. With her back turned, Tina silently mouthed the words. "This mutt has to go."

Tina adjusted the straps on the pack. "Okay, but I'm not carrying dog shit in my new pack!"

"We're going to hike along the east side of the Magic Mile, chair lift, then up to the Silcox warming hut." Kevin pointed with a hiking pole.

"Like that looks easy!" Tina said and started using her hiking poles in the loose red pumice. They walked by the climbing register kiosk since they were not climbing to the summit. The longest they would be on the mountain was three, maybe four, hours.

"It's six miles round trip up to Crater Rock and back," Kevin yelled at Tina, now ten steps ahead. "You'll only be going half that far, but you should pace yourself."

She stopped and turned back. "Like, don't worry. I'll save some strength for tonight." Tina was irresistible, even with her often unintentional pointed words.

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From the back window of the rental van parked in the Northeast corner of the upper parking lot, Tim had the green pack in the crosshairs with the unregistered Elephant Gun that he had used to take a trophy African Savannah Elephant on his sixteenth birthday. His brother and dad also bagged Savannahs on this safari. The Baylor men wiped out an entire family that trip.

When Tina took a drink from the water bottle, which had been laced with Rohypnol, she'd be immobilized. Kevin would stop to help—then the kill shot! Tim was unaware that Kevin planned to leave Tina at the warming hut and that he'd hike the additional two miles to Crater Rock. Nobody knew he wanted to retrieve the crampon he had left behind last year.

It took over an hour for the trio to reach Silcox lodge. A 1,000-foot elevation gain over a mile is considered a challenging ascent. A light fog was coming in from the west. Tim switched gears and pulled on his camouflage gear to get a closer shot. He slipped the long gun into a nylon ski case; that made for perfect concealment. He stepped over the guardrail and slid about fifty feet on loose red cinder into the White River Canyon. It was a barren, one-eighth-mile-wide glacial cut. The White River Glacier had been receding for the past five thousand years. Ice-cold water ran through the center, and patches of spring grass grew in the moist, sandy soil. Tim hiked upstream along the west edge and stayed in the cover of the squatty trees and scrub brush.

Being in great shape from all the years of basketball, he effortlessly jogged across the clearing where a huge Elk and his three cows were grazing. The bull elk raised its massive rack to focus on something downstream. Tim stopped, pulled the elephant rifle from the ski case, put it to his shoulder, and saw something scurrying back and forth far down the canyon, with its nose to the ground. He saw a great gray wolf on a scent. A new elk calf was probably his next meal.

A hundred yards ahead, two huge lava rocks were leaning against each other and had an opening about the size of a large dog house. Tim trudged forward, worked himself into the triangle hideout, and searched for the lime green pack—nothing. *They went up late, so they'll have to come back the same way. That is when I'll pop a .470 Nitro Express bullet into Kevin's chest. Then Tina*

will be my concubine. No more about Kevin is this and Kevin is that. I'll take the shot when they're close enough that I can see the shock on Tina's face.

An hour passed, and the temperature dropped. Clouds were stacking up against the west side of Mt. Hood. Tim wished he had put on long underwear under his camouflage jumpsuit. The latex gloves made his hands sweat; they were insurance against leaving fingerprints.

Another thirty minutes passed, and it started to spit snow. *I'm going back to the van. I could have put too much Ruffie in Tina's sports drink. She might have collapsed up there behind a rock outcropping.* As Tim worked himself backward, something hard rammed up between his thighs deep into his butt. The pain was excruciating! He'd been impaled and was now lifted into the air by the rectum. His upper back slammed into the slot between the monolith rocks. He felt a snap at the waistline, and then the pain ceased. He was dropped half in and half out of the natural rock blind. He heard the high-pitched bugle of the bull elk as it walked away.

I need to crawl to my rifle and shoot off three shots for help! Tim's legs wouldn't move. He crawled only using his arms, but something pulled him back. He turned his head over his shoulder and saw a grey wolf eating at his leg. Tim tried to kick it off, but couldn't. He felt utterly helpless, just like all the women he had drugged and violated…

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Kevin was next in line to meet his reckoning. The Silcox hut is located east of the terminus of the Magic Mile chairlift. Ski season was over, summer was a month off, and it was midweek. Kevin forced the log door open with his shoulder. "Looks like you and Missy will have the place all to yourself."

"Kevin, my hands are cold, don't they have heat in here?" Tina whined

"Not this time of year. Didn't you pack gloves?"

"No. I just got my fingernails done. I didn't want to break a nail." Tina held up her hand and wiggled her long fake pink fingernails.

Kevin took off his pack and set it on a table made from log planks. He had learned to pack extra socks. "Here, use these for gloves."

Tina looked cross-eyed at the heavy gray wool socks with a red band around the top. "No way I'm putting my new nails into those gross, grampa socks."

"Suit yourself." Kevin tossed the socks on the table and closed up his pack. "You can go outside and baste in the sun. But do not move out of sight of this warming hut." Kevin warned; while concluding… *Tina might not be a good trekking partner.*

"What about your gloves? They're big enough that I won't break a nail."

"Here, take them." Kevin handed his gloves to Tina and picked up the socks.

"I'll pay you back," Tina said as she carefully worked her pink-painted claws into Kevin's climbing gloves.

"I'll be back by three. Stay put and feed Missy. The liver and onions will be good for her." Kevin left the hut. The sun on his back felt moderately hot, and he took off his parka halfway to Crater Rock. Sweating too much is why wearing layers is a trick outdoorsmen live by. Something Kevin wasn't concerned about since it wasn't a summit climb. The new Danner boots felt right. The boot grease made them waterproof, thanks to Lilly.

Kevin laid his overstuffed pack on the ledge he had knocked the crampon off almost a year ago. He tossed out the rope and tied a clove hitch to his harness D-ring. He wasn't even twenty feet into the loose lava rock when the clove hitch popped open to nothing more than a single wrap around the smooth titanium D-ring. The lava gravel field was like a field of ball bearings. Kevin fell on his knees, rolled onto his back, dug the new Danner boots into the red rock, and with bare hands gripped the 9.99 mm rope. He stopped ten yards short of the crater lip. The rapid descent without gloves cut a half-inch rope burn across both hands.

Splayed out on his back staring skyward, the words 'God's will be done' were not a comforting thought, nor was the direction of the weather pattern now coming from the east. There was now a hint of sulfur fumes in the air from the fumaroles. The consistencies of the wet snow started to stick on the rope and reminded Kevin that he'd forgotten to pack an ascending ratchet for a smaller rope. "God, I could use some help here!" Kevin yelled toward the building clouds.

The crampon was to his right, about ten feet away. Kevin pulled up twelve feet of the rope that was dangling over the edge of the crater. He wrapped two loops around his waist and then rolled to the right and snatched the crampon. He sat up and strapped it to his left Danner boot. Some slimy boot grease got on his hands and started to burn. He got to his knees, then onto his feet, and jabbed and twisted the metal spikes into more solid ground. "Your will be done," were Kevin's words every step he took. It took blood, skin, and mercy before he made it back to the ledge.

Snow and sleet were now blowing sideways to the west. He turned his back to the wind and retrieved his cell phone from a

pocket on his pack. There was one bar for signal, and less than half of the battery icon was showing.

"Nine-one-one. What's the emergency?"

"This is Kevin Trask."

"Kevin, is this an emergency?"

"Sort of. I left my girlfriend and my dog at the Silcox warming hut above Timberline Lodge. Could you call the lodge and have a snow cat go pick them up?"

"Mr. Trask, we are not a call forwarding service. Please call Timberline Lodge yourself and make those arrangements."

"I can't. I'm on the mountain and might have to dig in for the night. I'm the grandson of Donald Trask, the founder of Trask Trailers Inc. I'll pay for whatever it costs!"

Pride kept Kevin from asking for his own help. It was bloody hands that caused the cellphone to slip from his grip, bounce on the ledge, then end over end into the crater.

Pride is known as the deadly sin…

"Hello! Hello, are you still there? Hello," this felt like a do-or-die call. Helen logged the Caller ID number and flagged her supervisor. It was almost thirteen years to the day when this dispatcher took a call from the Timberline Lodge front desk reporting that a group of students from an Episcopal school was stuck in an unusual late-May snowstorm. Seven students and two adults froze to death over the next three days.

"Call Timberline Lodge and ask them to go check the climbing register to see if a Trask signed in. I'm going back to my desk and check the weather report for the Cascades," the supervisor ordered.

"Timberline Lodge, how can I help you?"

"This is Helen from the nine-one-one call center. Could I get someone to check the climbing register and see if Kevin Trask signed in to summit today? I took a call from a cellphone; the caller ID showed **Trask Inc**. The individual did say he would pay whatever it cost to snowcat his girlfriend and dog from the Silcox house. When I called back, there was no answer."

"There's no need to send anybody outside in this brewing ice storm. I checked Mr. Trask and his model girlfriend in before noon today. She was all in pink, her fingernails matched, and they had a little Aussie with them. I need to contact one of the snowcat operators." The desk clerk disconnected.

Helen put in a call to the Clackamas County Sheriff's dispatcher and then gave a heads-up call to a search and rescue (SAR) volunteer out of east Portland, POST 631. There were roughly three hours of daylight left, and her supervisor informed her that cloud cover had just ruled out any helicopter rescue.

Helen started to pray.

Within two hours, an orange suburban parked in front of the arched corrugated tunnel into the basement of the historic lodge. Three of the SAR's team members, Andy, Bruce, and John, who were known as skilled rescuers, not baggers (short for body bagging), rushed up two flights of ski-boot-worn stairs into the main lobby.

Tina was sitting at a fold-up table in front of a massive fireplace with five microphones in front. She was tapping her fingernail next to a large pair of climbing gloves and a steaming latte.

A KATU reporter asked a question. "How long have you and Mr. Trask been dating?"

"Ah, like over four years. After he left Gonzaga to play for the Duke Blue Devils, we met at one of the teams I cheered for."

KGW news was next in line. "Why were you and Mr. Trask climbing the mountain today with bad weather coming in?"

"Oh, like we weren't climbing the mountain. We were doing a practice hike to get in shape to help some Army guys struggling with PSD," Tina answered.

"You mean PTSD, don't you?" yelled a reporter from the pack.

John Olson approached a Clackamas County sheriff and took notes. "Has she given any helpful information yet?"

"Nope, not yet."

Andy busted forward, picked up the gloves, and examined the extra leather patch on the palm. "Whose are these?"

"They're Kevin's; he wanted me to wear them and hold his sick dog to keep the puppy warm." Tina's lie was almost believable.

"Did he have another set of gloves?" Andy demanded.

"I think so, he had a big pack of stuff, even some wool grampa socks."

"Did he have gloves on when he left you at the warming hut. I don't want to hear your college day BS. Yes or no, did he have gloves on?"

"Leave her alone, she almost froze to death." A voice came from the den of babbling truth benders.

"Where is the dog?" Ken asked as sternly as Andy had probed for answers.

"They put him in the Ski Patrol shed. The thing puked up liver and onions. Like he got altitude sickness just like I did."

"Bull shit. No one gets altitude sickness at 6000 feet unless they are an airhead." Kenneth headed for the Ski Patrol room. He was all too familiar with its location.

Andy grabbed Tina's arm, gripped it tightly, "Yes or no! Did Mr. Trask have these gloves on, or did he give them to you?"

"He gave them to me so I could keep the little Missy dog alive. I love that dog so much, even with all its problems…"

"Oh, that's so sweet, Ms. Tina. Maybe I could interview you about saving the dog for our morning show. I see a book deal in the making." The Fox News reporter had other plans.

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Missy was in a cardboard box with balled-up newspaper in the back corner of the unheated Ski Patrol shed. Keneth found some shop rags and headed to his unloaded log truck that had the stinger trailer piggybacked. He slipped the cardboard box on the floorboard beneath Spooner's bed on the passenger seat. Spooner immediately sensed his dying sibling and that she was in danger once again, as on the ranch in Madras. From the passenger seat, Spooner gazed into the box.

Ken found a bottle of 3% hydrogen peroxide in a first-aid kit, drew up an eyedropper of the clear liquid, and squeezed it down Missy's throat to make her vomit. Missy whimpered, vomited, and her head slumped into a balled-up newspaper. He shot another eyedropper of the clear liquid into her mouth. Ken started the truck and set the heater to blow gently on Missy. He then keyed up his CB radio and switched to channel 9.

"This is Zig-Zag-Ken putting out a call for help. Over"

"This is the Rubber-Ducky coming back at you. What do you need, Zig-Zag? Over."

"Queen-Bee here, fire away, Z-Z. We got yah. Over."

The back-and-forth CB radio chatter died down as Ken laid out what was happening from the east parking lot at Timberline Lodge. Darkness had settled in when Ken got out of the truck, pulled his stocking hat down over his ears, leaned into the wind, and headed toward SAR's communication tent that was set up on the west side of the lodge. The leader in an orange helmet with "ANDY" stenciled above the bill recognized Ken from a past search. Bruce and John were pointing at a map of different search locations. In the background, a NOAA Weather Radio kept repeating the discouraging report.

"Let's go lay low in the Rams Head bar and listen to Ken's plans," Andy quietly suggested to Bruce and John. They took one of the square fir-planked tables in a corner, and Ken laid out a plan. When the eleven o'clock news came on, the bartender turned up the volume on a flat screen over the bar. The lead story was about the heir to the Trask who was lost on Mt. Hood. A KGW exclusive interview with his girlfriend, who stayed behind to comfort their dog, suffering from altitude sickness, was scheduled for the following morning.

The news meteorologist ran extended weather forecasts showing that a cold front from Canada was merging with a tropical storm front moving up from the south, known as a Pineapple Express. A college photo of Kevin in his Gonzaga Basketball jersey

was shown repeatedly. Tina had supplied her own photo in a short, slinky black dress, wearing gads of gold costume jewelry at a fundraiser for the MeToo movement.

It was almost midnight when Kenneth climbed up into the cab and saw Missy curled up with Spooner on the passenger seat. He reached over and patted Spooner. That's a good boy, taking care of your baby sister. He keyed up the CB and broadcast the mission to fellow truckers hauling just about anything and everything that kept the USA alive and comfortable.

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Kevin gave thanks for the survival gear from China. He had deadheaded directly east into the whiteout, missing Silcox Lodge by 200 feet. He knew to stay put and bed down. He packed plenty of equipment, an important lesson learned last time on this mountain. He tied the four-season double-walled tent to the overloaded pack and kept the door opposite the wind. Once inside, he unrolled an insulated pad and got out the mountaineering stove. With bloody frozen hands, it was impossible to screw on a fuel container.

I could use a little help, God. Finally, Kevin attached the fuel to the stove, and it lit on the first push of the piezo igniter. He looked upwards. *Thank you, God*. *At least my feet are not frozen and torn to threads this trip*. *Thank you, Lilly, for the greased-up boots,*

With coffee boiling, he used the wool socks to pick it up and place it in his crotch… *Thank you, Lyle, for the tip on where to put hot coffee when using a stove in an enclosed tent.* Kevin unzipped the door about four inches. As Lyle had told everyone on their first trek, 'Better to burn your balls than to fall asleep with a stove on.'

Thank you, Mr. Keneth Saxton, for chewing me out for doing stupid stuff. Hey, but this time I came prepared. Kevin made a second cup of coffee.

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It was past 5 AM when Ken climbed down out of the cab and headed to the SAR's communication tent. The parking lot was filled with news vans, agency vehicles, and volunteer rigs. The sky cleared enough to make out an outline of Mt. Jefferson, sixty miles to the south.

Andy approached with a hot cup of coffee. "Are we good to go?"

"We'll know in 45 minutes. Shrimp says if he can see the sun peek over the horizon and the wind is not gusting over twenty miles an hour, he'd wind up the big bird. There's a line of truckers with their running lights flashing at the junction of Highway 26 and 97,

then a couple at Blue Box Pass, and my daughter at Highway 26 and Timberline Road."

"Shrimp won't have any company in the sky. The National Guard at PDX is fogged in," Andy spoke at a whisper.

"Probably best not to have the additional traffic overhead," Bruce said.

"Godspeed to the chopper crew," John Olson offered and then left to ready the litter and body bag.

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At 6:47, Shrimp looked over at Richard Johnson and asked, "You ready for this adventure?"

"Roger that! Let's make it happen." Richard had the handheld CB radio they communicated with each other to snatch log bundles.

The thumping ramped up, and Shrimp lifted the twin rotor, fourteen-ton Chinook helicopter from the logging site, dipped the cockpit nose, and headed northeast. The CH-47 had a top speed of 197 MPH, but with the low-pitch blades for lifting, they'd be lucky to hit 130 MPH or be able to climb to 10,000 feet. "We're on our way," Shrimp said into his helmet microphone.

"Roger that, I'll start blasting my airhorn," Ken replied. "I'm praying Kevin hears it." He started pulling on the horn chain that was strung across the top of the log truck cab. Even Missy could hear the low, belching roars.

Between blasts of the air horn, Ken scanned the mountain with binoculars. Bruce was scanning the mountain with a tripoded spotting scope while Andy was strapping Ken's tree-climbing belt into a full one-person hoisting harness. The Chinook lifting cable was directly under the fuselage, making a litter rescue impossible.

One of the news cameramen yelled, "There he is above and to the right of Silcox lodge."

Bruce adjusted the spotting scope. "I got him! He's straight up from the Palmer Glacier about one hundred yards just below the Devil Kitchen's headwall. He's waving his arms. He doesn't have gloves on!"

It took about 10 minutes for the live video to be broadcast on all Oregon television stations. It took another ten minutes before the so-called experts were interviewed one after another and gave their opinions.

Lost Trask heir spotted below ice walls at 10,400 feet. Portland is still socked in with fog. The three-day forecast for more ice or heavy wet snow was broadcast over the AM and FM radio bands.

Tina got herself interviewed for the second time. "Ms. Tina Williams, why did you have Mr. Kevin Trask's gloves?"

"Like, I wanted Kevin to take his gloves, but he insisted that I stay behind and save our little Missy."

"Where is the dog now?"

"I think she went to dog heaven." Tina forced out a tear.

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"Look, down there." Richard Johnson pointed out of the cockpit. "A bunch of trucks with their running lights flashing are pulled over on the highway."

"That should be Blue Box Pass. There should be more flashing lights at the Frog Lake parking lot." Shrimp replied. Two minutes later, more semi-trucks' lights appeared, and Shrimp was only a hundred feet above tree level, staying under the cloud cover.

"Up ahead, more lights!" Richard pointed; he could see Mary and Lilly waving next to one of the Saxtons' four-wheel drives at the highway department chain-up area. Across Highway 26 from the road to Timberline Lodge.

"Get ready for a snatch and grab," Shrimp said calmly as he halted, hovered 14 tons of aerospace-grade aluminum alloy, and dialed in 100 for the drop cable length. Shrimp was a video gamer on steroids. Being small, he spent his after-school time behind a game console, not on a court or field—he was an all-star. "I only have a service ceiling of ten thousand feet with this whirlybird. The rotors are retrofitted to lift logs, not fly high."

"What does that mean?" Richard nervously asked

"It means we'll not be able to spool out much cable. Hovering above 10,000 feet for more than a minute will be a challenge. You good with that?"

"Look up there!" Richard pointed at a huge bald eagle soaring above, then replied, "I'm good with it. Let's go get Kevin."

The thumping and pounding of the twin heavy-lift rotors could be heard from the parking lot. Camera crews rushed to the guardrail and filmed the enormous helicopter as it came up the White River Canyon. Andy and Ken were in the middle of a clearing, waving ice axes overhead. Kenneth grabbed the cable and quickly snapped Andy into an automatic release hook and then gave the thumbs up while handing Andy a second ice axe. Shrimp tucked his head back into the cockpit and slowly rose vertically. Moving forward or to either side could trap Andy between some of the rock outcroppings—it would be carnage not even the news media would play.

Andy looked like a robot spider with snowshoes on his feet and an ice axe held in each hand.

"We're going to run into the face of that cliff," Richard yelled.

Shrimp halted the forward movement. "Spool out fifty more feet of cable." He backed away from the face of Devil's Kitchen.

With his hands shaking, Richard moved the thumb wheel from 100 to 150 while the CH-47 chopped at thin air. He yelled out the numbers on the counter, "One hundred thirty, one hundred forty, one hundred forty-five, one hundred fifty."

Shrimp heard Rich over the horrendous sound of the twin turbos ramped up to full throttle and screamed, "It's now or never."

Cameras, eyes, and binoculars focused on the helicopter as it slowly inched forward. At least a million people were watching the action on live TV. Everyone in the parking lot held their breath. Andy looked like a mad warrior, swinging axes, scrambling to its prey. He wrapped and secured Ken's tree-climbing belt around Kevin's waist, bear-hugged him as Shrimp backed away. Ninety seconds later, Kenneth Saxton unsnapped the live cargo and waved overhead at Richard. As the cable retracted, the Chinook headed down the White River Canyon.

Search and Rescue members from Post 631 loaded Kevin into a litter and carried him up the embankment to a waiting ambulance. At the guardrail, a Medicine Woman placed a leather bag of balm on Kevin's chest and said, "Remember, Bull Elk warned about rubbing too much peyote on all at once."

When Ken Saxton stepped over the guardrail, the babbling news-hounds wanted to know the story behind the lone crampon. Kenneth didn't say a word. He walked to the log truck, put the crampon behind his seat, climbed in, and drove off.

Chap 40—————Epilogue

Ordinary volunteers doing the extraordinary would have been a better news story. Unfortunately, good deeds and volunteering aren't what John Q. Public desires to read about or see in the news. Dark news and celebrity gossip are what drive advertising revenue to the bottom line. On a morning show, Tina told how she had warned Kevin about the weather, that she thought he should have packed extra gloves, and the rest of the story would be in her soon-to-be autobiography.

Kevin didn't see Tina's fifteen minutes of fame. He was hallucinating on the peyote rubbed into his hand wounds and whatever else was dripping into the IV he was hooked up to. His dream-like state was surreal. One moment, he was placing himself in the mercy of God's hands, and the next, he was envisioning the inscription 'Work for God' on his grandfather's pocket watch. Religion so often confuses the simple message to love God and thy neighbor.

The plastic surgeon at Portland Adventist Hospital couldn't believe what he had witnessed overnight. He expected the frostbitten flesh to have turned black, needing to be cut out, maybe fingertips cut off.

The hospital bed phone rang. "Kevin, I hate to keep bugging you. A million dollars is a lot of money just to let slip away."

"How so?" Kevin put the phone on hands-free.

"Your girlfriend Tina has been on the air claiming that she is the new Trask Inc public relations officer. The sales agreement is for no new hires. We need to cash that earnest money check ASAP. You need to be in Los Angeles before the banks close tomorrow. Should I charter a flight?"

"No, I'm putting all of this into bigger hands than mine."

"Kevin, are you okay? Are you on painkillers or something?" Condi was frustrated.

Kevin rubbed more Peyote suave into his palms. "I'm fine… I need to sort some things out. I need closure for not saying something about Gus at his funeral service."

"I hope there's nothing to sort out about us," Tina said as she came in and sat down in a chair next to the hospital bed.

"No, not at all, sweetie," Kevin replied, looked over, and smiled.

"Kevin, what in the hell is the matter with you?" Condi's voice blasted out of the handset. "Quit being a jackass and pull yourself together."

"Okay, whatever, you're the boss." Kevin turned and lay back in the hospital bed.

"She's not the boss! As we talked, I can help you out with downsizing. You'll see my corporate skills when I do the celebration party thing for Gus. Just wait and see how much money I can raise. I learned a lot at the Red Cross."

"What about Missy?" Kevin asked, struggling to keep his eyes open.

"Some uncouth, grungy man bitched me out for leaving her in a box. He took her home to die. That mutt wasn't healthy from the beginning."

"I know. That's why I picked her out…" Kevin drifted off.

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Kevin's dream turned surreal when an airman was standing at the foot of his hospital bed. "I'm Captain Carl William Lasiter, here to fly you to the Air National Guard Station in Oxnard, California. You'll be flying in the backseat of an F-105D Thunderchief, so you'd better take these anti-nausea pills."

The Air National Guard 142nd Fighter Wing unit, located adjacent to the Portland International Airport, seemed real. The 3 plus-g-force on the climb, then the banking to the south, caused a temporary blackout. Over the headset, Kevin thought he heard something about a favor and the pilot's name.

When the Thunderchief fighter jet leveled off, Kevin asked,

"Captain Carl, am I dreaming?"

"No, sir, but you might need to turn up your oxygen level when I hit the afterburner. Just don't hit the eject level. Major Richard Johnson would be upset with me."

"So, I'm not dreaming?"

"No, sir, this is real. Sit back and enjoy the ride."

Condi was waiting at the National Guard airstrip in Oxnard. She walked out of the hangar and hugged Captain Lasiter. "Thank you, Carl."

"No problem, doll. It was good to hear from your dad. We're planning a fishing trip for steelhead this fall. By the way, how old is your son now?"

"Ali is six and growing fast."

"Well, when Ali is big enough, I'll give him a ride in this old Thunderchief." Carl patted the fuselage of the F-105D fighter jet. "There were 382 of them shot down during the Vietnam War. This was one of the trainer jets with a backseat."

"How'd you pull that off?" Kevin asked as Condi pushed him toward a waiting limo.

"Carl and Richard were stationed at the same base. Carl got shot down and spent five and a half years as a prisoner of war. I asked my father to call in a favor."

"So, you and Richard are talking again?"

"That's private family stuff." Condi quipped. "Now let's get you over to the bank so that you can endorse that check."

At the Bank of America in Los Angeles, one million dollars got transferred into a non-profit account named 'Work for God'. It was the middle of the night in China. Mr. Meng wouldn't get notified until the financial organizations opened in Beijing. He was on the shuanggui summons list for the failed Y2K mission and the non-return of the 3-caret blood diamond. If both became failures, he'd be repeatedly tortured and held in solitary confinement for six years. His wife would face the same punishment. To the outside world, this seemed unfair to punish family not involved—but it worked to keep the 88 million members in the Communist Chinese Party in line.

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Kevin was packing up a few last items in his office when there was a knock on the door. "Who is it?"

"Kevin, Congressman Lyle Haskell would like to talk with you," Patty answered, turned, and darted down the stairs. She was disgusted with Kevin for offering Tina a public relations PR position.

"Come on in, Congressman," Kevin yelled as he dropped a DEI award plaque in the wastebasket.

Lyle burst through the door. "That was embarrassing to see you stuck up on Mt. Hood after you'd been on one of my overnighters."

"Well, I took your advice and was careful not to burn my balls."

Lyle laughed. "So, you got one of those backpacking coffee pot, combo stoves?"

"Yeah, it worked great." Kevin motioned for Lyle to take a chair. "What do you need?"

"I stopped by to ask a huge favor and to share something private."

"So, what kind of favor do you need?"

"Well, this is about a fellow combat soldier and friend. Private Allen Mitchell served as an electronic technician during Desert Storm. While he was working on a Patriot Missile Launcher, the turret turned and broke his back. There was some sort of intermittent wiring malfunction."

"Whoa, how'd Mr. Mitchell end up?" Kevin asked with concern.

"He ended up paralyzed from the waist down. Allen's also on a suicide watch list. His family and church have turned their back on him."

"What for?"

"Well, his congregation doesn't believe in military action."

"So, what about, Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God."

"Honestly, the real issue is that he came out as gay."

"Ah… Okay, I get that." Kevin was now searching his own soul. "What about the Don't Ask, Don't Tell policy?"

"That's for the military, not a church," Lyle answered.

"Religion sucks!" Kevin mumbled.

"At times it does," Lyle replied and then asked, "Do you have, Don't Ask, Don't Tell here at Trask Trailers?"

Kevin leaned back in his chair, then rubbed his chin. "I don't think so. Those four words are more complicated when you really think about it."

"A lot more so, if you're gay."

Kevin moved his hand from his chin, rocked forward in the chair, and was about to ask, but didn't.

"Well, anyway, I just wanted to let you know about the struggle Allen's dealing with." Lyle headed for the door.

Kevin stood still, searching for words. Finally, he said, "We have a hiring freeze right now, so my hands are tied."

Lyle left in silence—he was used to the cold shoulder brush-off.

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Maria was leaving when Kevin came in through the service entrance. "Mary called and wants to know about a key fob and a dog crate."

"Who's Mary? What about a key fob and a dog crate?" Kevin was confused

"Don't know! The phone number is on the message board." Maria pulled the door closed behind her. She was not pleased with the new Kevin, either. Maria had set dinner out along with a note:

Should Papa and I be looking for work, too? He's one of those workers who can't speak English, per your girlfriend on TV.

Kevin flipped the note over. There were no instructions on how to heat his food. This was unusual for Maria. No heart or smiley face, either. He dialed the number on the message board.

Mary was the closest to the yellow wall phone. She set her silverware down and answered, "Hello."

Kevin didn't recognize the voice. "Ah… Who's this?"

"Kevin, it's Mary. Lilly's mom."

"Oh… I'm sorry, Mary. I think this is the first time we've talked on the phone."

"I don't know. For sure, it's the first time we have spoken long-distance."

"What do you need to know about a key fob?"

"Richard moved your car from Timberline Lodge to our parking lot on one of his flatbed trailers. They were going to tow it into Portland. Now he needs the key thingy to get the dog stuff out of the back."

"I gave the key fob to Tina." Richard and Lilly quit eating dinner and listened.

"Oh… Richard wanted to get the dog crate out for Missy. She's constantly following Spooner around, and we don't want her to get run over in our parking lot."

"I thought Missy died?" Kevin bellowed with joy.

"No. Why do you say that?"

Kenneth took the yellow handset. "Hey son, don't feed a dog Liver and Onions!" He handed the phone back and followed Lilly out to the front porch. "For a college boy, he don't know much."

"You're right, Dad. Rich college boys don't know or care about anything except…" Lilly burst out in tears.

Kenneth pulled her close, patted her on the back, and said, "Somehow we should keep that little dog."

A bigger flow of tears came forward. Lilly rubbed them into Ken's flannel shirt and then went back to the kitchen. Mary was sitting at the table, hands folded, head bowed, praying. She looked up and said, "My little darling, come sit and listen."

"No, Mom, it's okay."

"I've never told you this…" Mary swallowed and then continued, "It was I who asked your father to marry me. If I had not, you or your brother would not have been born into this world. Ken was too full of pride and mostly naive about a woman's feelings. I feel your unsettled yearning. Come sit and pray with me for that young man's wandering trials and tribulations."

Lilly sat, they cupped hands and prayed that God's will be done.

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Kevin dumped his dinner in the garbage and called Tina. "Didn't you tell me my dog died?"

"No, I told you some uncouth, grungy guy took the mutt from me!"

"His name is Kenneth Saxton."

"Saxton isn't that the name of the beanpole you brought to the senators' fundraiser last fall?"

"Her name is Lilly…" Kevin was getting perturbed.

"Kevin, remember how we talked about that diamond necklace at the fundraiser?"

"Yes, I remember. Lilly found it. I have it."

"Can I come by and get it? I'll pay you back with what every guy likes."

"Tina, I'm not every guy."

"Kevin, you're getting too Christian. But I'll fix that when we are working side by side."

"Tina, I'll call later!"

Kevin hung up and called Condie. "Can you arrange a flight back to Portland with the war hero and POW Captain Carl?" Condie seemed to be the only one not upset with him. Someone he could trust, didn't put up with any drama, and would have zero tolerance for all workplace hanky-panky.

Condie knew when not to take advantage of a favor and didn't call Carl. She put her dad on standby in case Kevin ran into a travel snafu. She chartered the Trask jet, arranged for a Limo to pick up Kevin at PDX, and had a Locksmith scheduled to meet Kevin before noon at the Zigzag Ranger Station.

"There's the locksmith," Kevin said from the back seat.

"I see her." The limo driver put on the right blinker.

The technician approached the rear window. "Mr. Trask, I'm Jessie. We're talking about a nineteen ninety-five Range Rover, correct?"

"I don't know what year, but yes, it's a Range Rover. It's at the fishing guide shop up there on the left."

"I'll follow you." The technician went back to a van with a small satellite dish on top and followed the limo. She pulled up next to the SUV, got out with a slim-jim in her hand, walked up to the driver's door, slipped the slim-jim between the glass and window rubber, and popped the lock. The car alarm started beeping. She reached inside, pulled the hood latch, and disconnected the battery. The alarm ceased, and Spooner, with Missy following, came out of Ken's workshop.

Kevin got on his knees to pet them.

Ken approached, "Y'all sure you want to separate these two?"

Kevin immediately felt the pressure. "I don't want to, but… Maybe I can bring her back for monthly visits?"

"Like what happens to kids in a divorce? I'll go get her stuff." Ken turned and went back to his shop.

Kevin heard the bells on the door to the guide shop, and Lilly came out onto the porch. The dogs ran to her. She picked up Missy and started loving on her. Kevin stopped at the bottom step. "How are things going?"

"Will you marry me?" Lilly said softly.

"Are you talking to me?" Kevin asked.

"Yes, Mr. Kevin Donald Trask. Will you marry me?"

"Why, are you pregnant?"

"Mr. Trask, I got bad news!" the technician yelled from across the parking lot.

Stuck between a rock and a hard place, Kevin decided to hear the bad news first and headed across the parking lot.

Lilly loaded both dogs into her jeep and tore off!

Kenneth came out of his shop with Missy's things. "Where is Lilly going?"

"I don't know. She asked if I'd marry her, and I asked if she was…" Kevin stopped himself

"If she was what?" Kenneth asked, and then the Range Rover alarm started blasting again.

"I've got to go!" Kevin rushed away from any further interrogation.

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The sun was high in the sky by the time Kevin made it to the Saxtons' cabin. It felt weird to turn off the Range Rover with a screwdriver instead of a key. Both dogs ran down the stairs. Kevin had venison jerky for both of them. He grabbed a box of chocolates, flowers, and a bottle of wine and stopped at the bottom of the stairs. "Lilly, I know you can hear me! Please come out so I don't have to yell."

The door squeaked. Lilly came outside and folded her arms across her chest.

"I'm sorry about asking if you are pregnant. My grandfather always warned me about planting a seed and not knowing how or where it might grow. So please, please understand my hurtful off-the-cuff reply goes all the way back to my teenage years."

"Okay… I forgive you," Lilly mumbled.

Kevin set some of the stuff down, came up the stairs with only flowers and a vending machine ring. Lilly uncrossed her arms, stood tall, and walked across the deck.

Kevin met her halfway, took a knee, then took her hand. "Lilly Saxton, I would be honored if you would share your life with me."

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Their wedding date was set for ten days out, on May 17, 1999, a Tuesday, at Timberline Lodge. Three days before, Kevin had a weekend campout with eight veterans. The following week, Lilly had a guiding trip scheduled with two congressmen that she couldn't reschedule. Truth be told, Lilly never dreamed or wanted an elaborate wedding—she'd be happy to have five guests to invite.

Kevin just wanted to do the right thing—living together wasn't a consideration. The old family rifle hanging above the mantle in the Saxton cabin was also a subliminal message. A honeymoon to some romantic world destination would need to be put on hold.

Honor thy father and thy mother…

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After five minutes of screaming over the phone, Patty was ecstatic to be the maid of honor. Grampa and Grandma Johnson were blessed to have a whole week with Ali, the ring bearer. Mary and Ken made accommodations for grandparents and invited a few other people on Kenneth's work crew. Greg, the pastor of Trinity Lutheran Church and once Billy Trask's best friend, would officiate the service.

The two mothers shared their personal health concerns for about five minutes, Mary's hip, and Linda's cancer, but then shifted into full speed to make sure every small wedding detail was taken care of. Portland is known as the City of Roses, and, being May, they were in full bloom. Robert Trask took charge of arranging flights for three of the grandparents and some family on both sides. Richard rented a cabana and had it set up on the deck of the family cabin with a mini fridge filled with wine, chocolates, cheeses, French pastries, and love.

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Tina was the last item to get crossed off Kevin's list before the wedding. They agreed to meet at the gates to the Bohemian Grove compound, just over an hour's drive from San Francisco airport. Mailing the 3-carat diamond necklace was too risky, especially after Kevin learned it was most likely a blood diamond.

In a golf cart, Tina came down a road lined with old-growth cypress, moss, ferns, and lush green vegetation. Kevin grabbed

the necklace and hopped out of the rental car when a guard in camo appeared out of nowhere. "Get back over the line!"

Kevin backstepped, and Tina stopped beside him and held out an invitation. "I know I'm not invited to the wedding. But here is an invitation for your father to come to one of our getaway campouts this July."

Kevin took the invitation and handed the necklace to Tina. "So, you like the PR position here?"

"Like for sure. There are even some billionaires who come here."

"Well, I'm glad that you found your fit, Tina." Kevin turned and got into the rental car.

Tina motioned for him to roll down the window. "If you get tired or want to sneak away from the buck tooth, bean pole for a real woman, you got my number."

"Lilly is not buck-toothed anymore. She's been on the Trask dental insurance plan for quite a while. God willing, we'll need a maternity doctor someday."

"Oh… Whatever." Tina huffed. "Kevin, you're becoming one of those bible thumpers."

"It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God," Kevin recalled out of nowhere.

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Ironically, Kevin was at the desk that both Grandpa and Robert Trask used for almost half a century. He had pen to paper but had only jotted down a few lines. Patty knocked and somberly said, "Kevin, it's fifteen minutes till eleven. We should head down and go through the lunchroom." Summing up Gus's life with just a few words felt wrong. A tribute to someone who spent most of their life within five miles of Trask Trailers boiled down to, Gus did good in life, and then he died.

Kevin looked up. "Did many people show up?"

"Not really." Patty fibbed, not wanting to alarm Kevin, that the entire parking lot was full, and cars were parked on both sides of Navy Way Road. The newly cut doorway through the cafeteria to the old Navy training room was the route she led Kevin. The noise and size of the crowd were something he had only experienced at college basketball games. There must have been over a thousand people inside and more coming in.

Patty pulled Kevin toward a flatbed trailer with newly retrofitted LED lights flashing. There was a podium in the center of the trailer. The newest Trask employee had his wheelchair at the back of the trailer. "Allen, those light-emitting diodes are super bright. They'll

help make our trailers safer." Patty shouted as an icebreaker to help ease Kevin's fear of public speaking.

"They have a new LED coming out that has more LUX than these. I'm waiting on the reliability data," Allen spoke so that Kevin could hear over the din of all Gus's friends.

Somewhat distracted, Kevin replied, "Allen, we're lucky to have found you. We have had issues with our trailer lights in the past few years. Looks like you'll be a good fit here."

A good fit, shot through Allen's skull, faster than what a self-inflicted bullet would have been just a few weeks ago. A new purpose and self-worth pushed the dark purple haze out of Allen's life. Often, a call to a suicide hotline can get a person help and over that horrible dark hump. Calling a suicide hotline is courage—not weakness.

Kevin jumped up on the flatbed trailer. He pulled one page from his pocket with only three points on it. Allen had an orange safety whip pole attached to his wheelchair; he unclipped it and handed it to Kevin. The small American flag at the top of the fiberglass rod was similar to what Gus had had on his three-wheeler. Kevin walked behind the podium, waved the flag, and tapped the microphone.

"Um… Thank you all for coming down here on a Saturday. Patty and I had a long discussion about having food at this celebration of life for Gus. She talked me into a potluck, saying that women love sharing their favorite dishes. From the wonderful aromas, she was right, again." The crowd laughed, helping Kevin relax.

Through his nose, Kevin drew a deep breath. "The food smells wonderful… Now to squash the rumors about Condi and the reason she is not here." Kevin paused and then said, "Condi is no longer the Trask Inc. interim CEO."

There was dead silence, followed by someone in the crowd yelling, "Typical corporate BS… Screw the working class, always has been, always will be." This ignited more jeering and cat-calling!

With one giant leap, CP was on the trailer and took the microphone. "Hey, shut up and let the man speak!" CP eyeballed a few of the agitators, and the crowd quieted.

Kevin took back the mic. "Richard Johnson, a former manager here, took her son, his grandson, to Oregon. Ali loved fishing and camping so much that she went up there to be with him. Currently, Grandpa and Grandma Johnson are working out a summer break schedule. When Condi gets back, she will be the permanent CEO of Trask Inc."

The hush turned to cheers and clapping! At last, the CEO position was filled by the most experienced person, not one of the goons from Hung Meng Imports. Condi was someone who did right for the bottom line and expected loyalty from the team.

Kevin paused before he started again. “Robert and I have put all plans to sell or to outsource on the back burner. For the last six months, production and profit have been at an all-time high. Robert would like to say a few words.” Kevin motioned for his dad to come up.

Robert Trask stepped up onto the back of the flatbed trailer and took the microphone. “Thank you. Thanks to all of you for what looks to be our most profitable year ever.” There were at least two minutes of applause, jeering, and yelling. Robert motioned Linda to come up.

The white tennis shorts displayed her athletic legs, and her ponytail stuck out the back of the pink ball cap that had "Cancer Survivor" embroidered on it. Robert handed the microphone to Linda. “I want to thank everyone who sent cards and prayers during my most recent cancer scare. Thank you and God bless.” She handed the microphone to Kevin, then hugged him and kissed him on the cheek.

With the microphone in hand, Kevin pointed toward Patty and said, “As for Patty. She is not as big as a house. She is having twins!”

That comment divided the audience. Most of the women frowned, some men wore guarded smiles, and CP stayed stoic.

“After Patty has their babies, she will be running our new daycare!” Kevin pointed toward the interior door to Gus’ apartment, and a respectful hush came over the employees and their families.

“There is nothing that Gus would have wanted more than a bunch of future superheroes in his old apartment.”

The words, “Roger that,” came over and over from the workers.

Kevin started reading again, “Gus also wanted the old Navy training pool filled in, probably because of mold and mildew issues. For some reason, remodeling this room was a major factor in the demise of the Trask Inc. sale. In Gus’s honor, we will turn this room into a full-size basketball court, a workout gym, or whatever we get from the suggestion box. This room will be built from the consensus of your suggestions.”

A daycare and a gym on the side of the manufacturing plant stunned everyone. A comforting silence of grace filled and hung over the crowd.

Kevin bent down behind the podium and lifted the red mini-doghouse that he had welded up for the back of Gus’s three-wheeler. The box now had the words "Suggestions" and "Donate" on each side. “We will use this box for your suggestions. If you would like to make a donation for Autism research in Gus’s honor, that would be great.” There was already a check for half a million dollars at the bottom of the dog travel box. The sight of the red

box caused Missy to bolt from Lilly's lap across the concrete floor and dance on her hind legs in front of Kevin.

Kevin bent down, picked up Missy, and shared important instructions, "FYI for all you pet owners out there. If your dog eats liver and onions, you should induce vomiting with hydrogen peroxide immediately."

"Thanks for that information, Mr. President, right before we dig into this wonderful potluck food." A voice came from out of the crowd, followed by laughter.

"The food smells great. Let's eat and be jolly. That's what Gus wants. I hear him right now. Over and out."

Lilly took Missy. "I'd like to introduce my wife, Lilly. After the fishing guide season, and I do some hiking with combat veterans, we will be building a home in Oregon."

Lilly stood tall and smiled. She had on a grey skirt, a simple white blouse, and silvery flat shoes that resembled Cinderella slippers. She waved at the crowd and then sat back down. The crowd clapped with approval. Some of the employees had met Lilly over the past week, when she, Linda, and Patty pulled together this tribute and wake for Augustine Donald Watt.

Kevin pulled notes from his pocket. "I have tried for months to come up with some facts or anecdotes about Augustine Watt. I wanted to put together a slide show, but only found three pictures of him." Kevin pointed to the wall where he had those three pictures framed and hung, and then looked at his notes. "Gus had his superheroes, and he shared with me about his favorite, the most Holy Trinity. He called them the three-in-one. He told me that the Trinity is like water, which has three states. Solid as Ice is God. The liquid is the water that poured from Jesus on the cross that baptizes and miraculously becomes blood."

Kevin lost his place in his notes and scanned back over them…

Finally, a woman spoke up from among the crowd. "And that third state is like the invisible water vapor of a light mist. You might not be able to see it, but the Holy Spirit is always waiting to shed His grace on thee." Kevin looked up from his notes to acknowledge the woman for her help. He got a tiny glimpse of a Marian blue cloak and pure white veil vanish out through the double doors.

Kevin continued… "Everyone who knew Gus respected him for his love of neighbor and his trust in an eternal life. Also, for his works and actions, and the simple words that he would repeat over and over again."

More than a hundred "Amens" came from the crowd.

Kevin looked out and over everyone. It dawned on Kevin how Gus had touched others with his unconditional love.

"Some days, I would pull up to the gate, and probably like some of you, I thought I had the weight of the world on my shoulders.

Sometimes, I might not even give a good morning or smile to Gus. Somehow Gus knew that something was bothering me."

"Amen's," rang out again.

"Now, when that gate automatically opens, I hear the three things he often preached."

—Love God—
—Trust in Jesus—
—Seek the grace of the Holy Spirit—

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About the storyteller—Chuck L

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Charles James Lesowske lives in Central Oregon and writes under the pseudonym James Andrew Edske. He started writing on an IBM Model C typewriter the same year he married Mary, on May 17, 1980, the day before Mt. St. Helens blew its top. After Jamie was born and before the arrival of the second daughter, Andie, the family moved from Portland, Oregon, to Sisters, Oregon, and built a solar home. It was an apprenticeship in electronics that enabled the Lesowske family to live remotely. Chuck traveled and worked in most major cities in the US, including Alaska and Hawaii.

While in airports, on planes, and in hotels, Chuck kept musing on an IBM laptop and writing inspirational Christian fiction. Baptized on the first day of spring in 1953, Chuck became a cradle Catholic. For 50-some years, he barely read or learned one line of scripture, which was the practice formed in Catholic school in the 1950's—1960's. The Baltimore Catechism was the go-to faith-formation resource before Vatican II.

Decades later, mystically, in the middle of the night, he awoke to 1 Corinthians 3:13 across the face of an LCD flat screen. He stumbled into the home office for a paper and a pencil and returned to the bedroom to jot down the passage. Sometime after that, he committed to writing a million words before his final chapter.

1 Corinthians 3:13

Each man’s work will become manifest; for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done.

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2. DO & DIE 233,148 words © 2018

3. SON SOURCE 97,627 WORDS. © 2020

4. THE NINE COMMANDMENTS 105,769 WORDS © 2024

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