

A man in a dark suit is walking up a set of wide, stone steps. He is seen from behind, carrying a black briefcase in his left hand. The background is a large, classical building with stone columns and a doorway. The overall tone is serious and professional.

A. WAYNE GILL

THE RUNNER

BOOK ONE IN THE MICHAEL KNIGHT SERIES

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Chapter 1

The first time Michael Knight heard God's call he was in the end zone of Ozark College in Ozark Falls, Missouri. His team was down by three points and there was less than thirty seconds left in the game. Todd McBride, the Ozark College Rams' starting quarterback and Michael's best friend, hurled the ball deep toward the end zone. It was either score or go home.

Already downfield, Michael could see the moment Todd cocked his arm backward to throw. He spun past his defender and locked his eye on the spiraling ball. The entire season now hung on his ability to make the grab. His abdominal muscles tightened into a knot. He sucked wind, long and hard. The entire crowd stood to its feet with anticipation. The visiting team counted out loud with the game clock, "Five, four, three . . ."

Michael dove. In an instant his six foot two inch frame had crossed the goal line. Todd's perfect spiral was in his hands. Victory! Michael had made the winning catch. The local fans exploded with shouts and cheers. The Rams were now in the Division Three Finals for the very first time. Michael's closest family members embraced each other, jumped, whooped and kissed. Some of them almost fell out of the stands. It was the Rams' finest moment and their boy, Michael, was right at the heart of it.

Still holding the ball, he rolled over onto his knees. His defeated defender, now five feet or so to his left, was bent over clutching his knees. Michael could hear his slow, labored breathing. In the distance the Rams' bench had emptied and all of his teammates were running toward him. Michael bowed his head to thank God for the win before the impending pile-on when he clearly heard the words:

“Before I made you in the womb I knew you and I have called you to preach to thousands and to thousands times ten-thousands.”

Michael snapped his head to the left and to the right. There was no one there. His defender was walking away from him, head bowed to the ground. Despite the noise from the bleachers, the voice had been so clear, so *near*; almost audible. Before he could think another thought, his teammates were on top of him.

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After two minutes of pounding and being pounded by his team, Michael stood to his feet and screamed out loud. In the distance, he could see his girlfriend Abby and his parents not knowing quite how to cut through the throng of football players, cheerleaders and others. He began to make his way toward Abby when Todd walked over and gave him an intense embrace.

The two co-captains had been together since they were cub scouts. Michael wasn't sure what Todd was thinking but he could remember every peewee football game they had ever played. Beneath the bright night-lights and surrounded by the jubilant crowd, the young men silently acknowledged that their playing days were almost over. After a few seconds, they let go of the embrace and Todd said, “We're going all the way baby.”

Michael laughed out loud. Ozark College would play for the Division Three Championship in one week. Everyone knew they were a long shot to win. Tonight's victory had come at a huge cost of will power, endurance and concentration. It would be difficult to regenerate that intensity within a week. Their opponents, the Springfield University Running Rebels were big, tough and undefeated. Todd often joked that Springfield football players ate cows for breakfast. Whatever the odds, Michael would

worry about Springfield later. Right now he was holding the winning football and he was feeling unbeatable.

“Damn right,” he yelled back to Todd when he felt the hand of his father, Reverend Jeremiah Knight on his sweat-drenched head. “Dad,” he said, startled, wondering if he’d heard the *damn right* comment. Even with Michael dressed in full football gear, Reverend Knight was an inch taller and more than a few inches wider than his son. The Reverend was a big man, with a voice that could roll like thunder. He had also played college ball, but as a 250-pound defensive lineman.

If Reverend Knight had heard Michael’s comment, tonight was not the time or place to discuss it. He beamed happiness and pride in his boy. He held him tightly and whispered, “Way to go Michael.”

Standing behind the Reverend was Michael’s mother, Kathryn. Through his dad’s bear hug, he could see her standing with an arm around Abby. Both women were teary-eyed and dwarfed by the two much larger men. He choked back his own tears and pulled them into a sweaty hug. His dark hair lay pasted to his skull. His blue eyes reflected the bright fluorescent lights. Kathryn stepped back and allowed Abby to give Michael a hug of her own.

She whispered in his ear, “You are *my* champion Michael Knight” and then kissed him on the cheek. Michael stared into her face. She had never looked more beautiful to him. They hadn’t won the Championship, but he was *Abby’s* champion. There was something about the way she said the words. He had never heard a sweeter sound. He stared into her eyes and mouthed, “I love you,” under his breath.

Years later Michael would realize it was at that precise moment he'd fallen in love with her. Reverend Knight also observed the moment. He squeezed Kathryn tight. Michael and Abby grew up together. Her parents were members of his congregation before either of them was born. For the parents, wedding bells were not far off.

Jeremiah and Kathryn sparkled. Their boy was becoming a man. Jeremiah spoke first.

"We're so proud of you Michael. You boys have worked hard for this and you all really deserve it."

Kathryn chimed in. "I thought I was going to have a heart attack on that last play." They all laughed together. Kathryn took his hand and squeezed. From the time Michael was a baby, the two of them spoke an inside language. Kathryn motioned her head to the left. "Your sister came to watch you play tonight."

Michael turned toward the direction of Kathryn's gesture. His older sister, Cindy, was standing twenty feet away with her boyfriend, Ramon Sanchez. She gave Michael the thumbs up and twirled her fingers hello. Michael glanced at Jeremiah, who now had one arm around Kathryn and was looking down at his shoes. Michael turned toward Cindy and Ramon. "Excuse me, guys," he said and walked toward the couple.

Cindy grabbed Michael's neck. "Great game bro."

Ramon, who had been patting Michael on the back added, "That was awesome Michael. Highlight film material."

"Before you call *Monday Night Football*, we have a little assignment called the Springfield Running Rebels next week."

"You guys will cream 'em."

“Your words to God’s ears, Ramon. Your words to God’s ears.”

Cindy had heard enough football small talk. She had no idea about the mechanics or importance of the game, but she was glad to have been there for Michael. It was easy to forget that in a town the size of Ozark Falls, population 11,945, a Division Three Football Championship was a big deal. Now that the big game was over, Cindy felt like having a Big Mac.

“Let’s grab some munchies on the way home Ramon.”

Ramon nodded in agreement and stuck out his hand. “Good job, Michael. Jerry Rice would be proud.”

Michael shook his hand and laughed. “I’m sure he was watching.”

The couple turned and headed toward Ramon’s Harley Davidson motorcycle. It was the first thing he bought when he ended his tour of duty in the Marines. He’d been in the same class at Ozark High as Michael’s older brother David. He met Cindy in his senior year when she joined the cheerleading squad of the basketball team. Ramon was the best point guard to ever play at Ozark. He still held the school’s assist and scoring records.

In his senior year, his father blew his brains out with a shotgun. He withdrew from his teammates and from sports. Before long, he was skipping school and getting drunk with friends.

Ramon’s mother Elsie also took it hard. She drank with him and with many men who moved in and out of their lives. Cindy stuck by him and convinced him to leave town. She’d read somewhere that the Marines could provide a new start in life. He took her advice and fought his way through boot camp and memories of his parents. Now he was

back in town, having received an early discharge for reasons he hadn't shared with anyone.

Ramon knew that Cindy's family, and Reverend Knight, in particular, didn't like him. Not to mention the star quarterback, Todd McBride. Ramon was tired of his nasty looks, every time he rode by with Cindy on his Harley. Even Todd's parents, who owned a chain of fast food restaurants in the area, gave him funny looks when he occasionally dined in one of their eateries.

Michael, at least, was always civil. His holy-rolling, older brother David and his friends were all two-faced. Although they were classmates, David never bothered to tell him about the God he seemed to want everyone else to know about. Maybe he wasn't good enough for David's God.

From across the field he could see McBride and his parents, the Reverend and wife talking with Head Coach, Ray Parker. How cozy. None of the coaches had seemed to care about *his parents* and what he'd gone through several years before. They also didn't give a rip about his pain. If he couldn't produce a championship, they weren't interested.

He would show this town that he was not a loser like his parents. He would show them that he could be better than Michael or Todd— better than any of them. Tonight was Ozark's night, but one day he would have his time under the lights.

Ramon kept walking slowly, Cindy trailing slightly behind. He'd had enough of the family scene. It was already dark, but he slipped on his sunshades. "Hypocrites," he muttered under his breath.

Nevertheless, he had to admit the Reverend's daughter was proving to be useful in more ways than one. Perhaps he would keep her around a while longer. He enjoyed seeing the town squirm.

###

Michael watched the couple walk away. They seemed so alone. For the first time that evening he felt sad. Cindy was living with a man outside of marriage and Jeremiah Knight would never accept it. He didn't know how to choose between his sister and his father, so he just kept his mouth shut.

Ramon seemed decent on the surface, but Michael knew about his past struggles with alcohol and with life. He wasn't convinced that the Marines had straightened him out because he looked like a man that wanted trouble. Michael focused on Cindy and let out a sigh. He couldn't tell her what to do, but he knew his dad was right about one thing—men who go looking for trouble always find it.

Chapter 2

Kathryn observed Cindy's chatter with Michael and caught her eye as she turned to leave with Ramon. She could see the hurt and defiance in her daughter's eyes and she instinctively broke away from Jeremiah and ran toward her. "Cindy," she called out.

In the distance, Cindy paused and beckoned Ramon to keep walking. Kathryn caught up to her, breathless. She placed her hand on Cindy's face and cupped her cheek.

"Hello, darling, how are you making out?"

Cindy attempted to say something, but only tears came. She avoided Kathryn's eyes and played with the zipper of her jacket. She looked like a little girl again; her hair in a ponytail, her jeans stuck in the laces of her duck boots.

"Why does he hate me?" she asked, now looking in Kathryn's face.

Kathryn paused and shook her head. "Your father doesn't hate you Cindy. Quite the opposite sweetheart; he loves you very much. There isn't a night when he doesn't pray—"

"Don't even go there Mom. Please do not go there."

Kathryn reached out to take her hand. Cindy turned away.

"I've got a question to ask . . . when he prays for me every night, who does he think he's praying to?"

"Cindy, you know this discussion leads us nowhere—"

She persisted, "No Mom, I want to know. *Who* is he praying to?"

“Cindy, I—”

“Then let me tell you, Mom. He’s praying to Jesus. And I don’t see anywhere in the Bible where Jesus says that you can stop loving your daughter because you don’t approve of her life.”

With that, Cindy began to bawl, but still standing rigid and defiant, fists clenched. Kathryn embraced her daughter and cried with her. Cindy pulled away and walked toward Ramon who had started the loud motorcycle. Kathryn wiped away her own tears. Cindy mounted the bike and Ramon jerked the hog forward.

Kathryn turned and glanced at Jeremiah. For a split second their eyes met and said the same thing: That’s our little girl over there and we’re losing her. Jeremiah’s eyes flashed back to his shoes.

Kathryn reflected on one of her favorite Bible verses, “Train up your child in the way he ought to go, and when he is old he will not depart from it.” She decided that she would leave the situation with God. Standing alone in the field between her husband and her child, she quietly whispered a prayer to the Lord. She had no Band-Aid big enough to heal this wound.

###

Michael trudged slowly toward his dad unsure of what to say. One thing he was certain about, he had no desire to play the referee. He’d been officiating matches between Cindy and Jeremiah for years.

Cindy always had a rebel’s heart. She was two years older than Michael and roughly three years younger than their older brother, David. The boys cruised through grammar and high school with hardly a bump in the road. Cindy’s high school career had been a

whirlwind. If there was a playbook about the behavior and lifestyles of pastors' daughters, Cindy was constantly writing new chapters.

Although she was a handful, most of her run-ins with authority were more in the nature of good-hearted fun. She'd never really experienced any serious problems. The wheels came off last summer when she announced that she was moving in with Ramon.

For the family, this was no detention for popping gum in class. This was a brazen move that cut against everything Jeremiah stood for and taught for more than thirty years in ministry. He forbade it. Cindy rebelled even more. Michael, Kathryn and David each tried to work on one or the other with no success. For the past year Jeremiah had said little more than hello or goodbye to his only daughter.

Michael watched his father as he neared the place where he was standing. He had the concerned look he always had whenever Cindy came around. At his height and weight, the team could use a presence like his on the field next week. Michael chuckled at the thought. Even if he physically could, Jeremiah had no desire to play sporting games. He was God's linebacker.

His favorite exercise was standing in the pulpit three times per week where he preached the word of God with conviction and power. There was never any doubt where he stood on an issue. He could open the Bible and clearly analyze or illustrate any point which he was always glad to do. Some people may not have agreed with the good reverend, but they sure weren't going to tell him to his face.

Michael couldn't help noticing that his dad was looking older. He was a cancer survivor on doctor's orders to cut back on his hours and commitments. He had done so to some extent, but in his eyes, there was no time to waste in God's army.

###

Michael approached Jeremiah, who was now joined by Coach Parker and Todd. Todd made a joke about the upcoming championship game. Ozark had pulled out tonight's game by a hair. It would take more than a desperation throw to win the next one. Jeremiah reassured the boys. "As far as I'm concerned, you boys are already champions. You all played with guts and heart out there. That's all we can ask of you."

"You're right, Reverend," Coach Parker added. "These young men have taught us a lot about courage and character."

Michael looked at Jeremiah. He didn't ask about or otherwise mention Cindy. Michael then looked at Todd. His face was saying exactly what Michael thought: Let's head to the locker room. We're missing the celebration. The boys dismissed themselves and jogged across the field. Todd turned to Michael, "I saw Cindy in the parking lot with your mom. How's she doing?"

Michael paused. He wanted to be careful with his answer. He knew Todd had always liked Cindy. Although he was the quarterback, well-built and handsome, Cindy never showed any interest. He was two years younger than her and Michael's best friend. He stood no chance.

"She seems to be doing alright," Michael said.

"Still seeing GI Ray, I see."

"I suppose."

Michael was glad to arrive at the boy's locker room. He pushed in the door with a rough shove. His teammates were dancing and standing on top of benches, pretending to smoke cigars. Others were bragging about the game. Todd ripped off his jersey and

struck a pose, straining every muscle in his body. Michael shouted and threw his arms around three or four players.

It was the Rams' greatest victory ever. They would all enjoy this memory for years to come. The local newspapers would record their glory, and Michael's spectacular catch. In his heart he thanked God for the victory and just as quickly, dismissed the voice in the end zone.

Chapter 3

David Knight loved to deliver a good sermon. He often joked that he would rather preach than eat. This Saturday's night service at the Morningside Community Church was no different. Although he held a slight regret that he couldn't attend Michael's game, which he guessed was probably over now, he was excited to be right where he was.

The church started in his home, with him, his wife Tara, and two other couples. The six of them were called, commissioned and sent from the First Baptist Church of Ozark Falls, the 500 member "big church" run by Jeremiah, a little over a year ago. In that brief period of time, the church had grown to fifty members and was now renting space in a 4000 square foot modular building owned by and located at Ozark College. This arrangement worked great because rent was cheap and the building could be configured easily into temporary classrooms for small group studies before and after services. It wasn't pretty, but it was functional.

From the beginning, David insisted on a Saturday, non-traditional service aimed primarily at un-churched young people and those at risk. He'd developed a heart for youth ministry over the years by serving in his home church under Jeremiah, since he was eleven years old. His early experiences made him sensitive to the serious problems facing young people. He'd dealt with drug addictions, broken homes, teenage pregnancies and abuses of all kinds. Even in a small town like Ozark Falls, the depth of issues facing young folks was breathtaking.

At first he was afraid to deal with the problems beneath the show put on by many churchgoers. It was one thing to smile at people passing in the aisles and another to know

that Johnnie was being abused by his uncle or that Mary Joe was three months pregnant and considering an abortion.

Jeremiah helped him recognize that he had a gift of understanding and relaying God's word to hurting people and that it was his mission in life to fulfill that purpose. He would never be happy unless he obeyed the God's mandate. At the age of seventeen, he stepped from behind the passing smile and into the ministry.

He tried to be a strong mentor and friend to Michael and Cindy, giving them a solid example of a young man sold-out to God. Cindy was unfazed as far as he could tell. For as much zeal as he showed for the Lord, she demonstrated equal fervor for pop stars, movies and wannabes. David prayed that she would one day find a committed Christian husband to help her along the path. God knows she wasn't on that path right now. He loved his sister, but didn't approve of her choices and supported Jeremiah in his position on her live-in relationship with Ramon Sanchez.

He and Ramon had been classmates at Winfield High, but ran in different crowds. He was president of the Christian Students Union and a part-time youth pastor for most of high school. Ramon was known for partying and being a hell-raiser. Ramon was definitely not his pick for his little sister and he knew that went double for Jeremiah.

He wished it could be different with him and Cindy. He wished that he could be more of an influence on her life. She'd always been headstrong; the type who takes the opposite side of any issue for the mere challenge. This had stymied her teachers, authority figures and their father to no end. David sighed. She was still stumping everyone.

One thing no one could argue with though, was her heart. She was one of the most compassionate and caring individuals he'd ever known. She could never stand aside and see someone in pain. She always did something about it. He remembered when they were kids Cindy always gave away her birthday money to needy children or to the church. During summers, she worked in food pantries and homeless shelters. Even now, she was working as a social worker at a youth center in Kansas City, not far away. She always reached out to touch the lives of broken people. In that way, she reminded him of Jesus.

He glanced around the room, quickly doing an inexact head count: Not bad for a Saturday night. Some members of First Baptist had volunteered to help him get the church off the ground and were faithful to be at each service. In some ways, Cindy put many of these regular church members to shame. She may not have attended church much, but she loved much.

David never doubted his call to full-time service. He'd done everything in church, from leading youth to cleaning the toilets. He was well-prepared and trained to begin and nurture a new church. When the time arose, Jeremiah and the First Baptist family commissioned him and Tara and sent them. Although nervous, he took comfort that First Baptist was just forty-five minutes across town if needed. As the sending church, First Baptist would stand with Morningside until it could survive on its own.

He wondered how Michael's game had gone. The Rams were definitely a long shot, but that didn't matter. The whole town seemed to come alive with the excitement of a potential championship. Church attendance had risen over the past six months. Maybe the congregation was looking for a little divine intervention. Usually, sporting events drove

people away from church. If the good people of Ozark Falls were crowding their churches to pray for their Rams, who was he to complain.

It was almost time to begin the services. David took to the pulpit and welcomed his guests to the house of God. The instant he took his place behind God's word, his whole spirit came alive. Like all the Knight men, he stood well over six feet and was only slightly trimmer than Jeremiah. He had dark, wavy hair and a tender face. His wife Tara stared at him. She had known him her entire life, but she'd never grown tired of hearing him speak.

David surveyed the audience. His earlier thoughts were right. It was a strong crowd for a Saturday evening, especially with *the game*, probably still wrapping up just three hundred yards away. At the rate the Lord was adding people to his little church, in six months he would need a youth pastor.

The local teens were responding to his outreach efforts. He was only twenty-seven years old, and still able to connect on their level. If the church continued to grow within that age group, he would need help soon.

Tonight he intended to preach about God's timing. Who knew this subject better than him? He was convinced that God had called him to be a bridge of grace and truth to his generation. It was no coincidence that he was appointed pastor over Morningside. He was a living example of his sermon.

Michael would graduate from Ozark within six months, just in time to take the youth pastor position. He could take additional classes at the Bible Institute started by Jeremiah at First Baptist, as David had done, and help him build Morningside into what God wanted. Many responding to his message were from Michael's age group and younger.

Michael was a popular scholar-athlete and committed Christian. He had followed David's footsteps as president of the Christian Students Union for a couple years. Many kids instinctively looked up to and followed him. David had no doubt about his potential impact as a youth pastor.

Eventually, he would spin-off Michael and Abby (they would certainly soon marry) into their own church, as Jeremiah had spun him. Within the next ten years, he felt that the Knights would literally lead thousands to the Lord. Their sons would do the same in their generation. The thought gave him a chill. He knew that Jeremiah was also excited. He and David had seen all of the ministry gifts in Michael, but he had been silent about his future plans. They were waiting for the end of football season to sit him down and share the vision.

David glanced at his notes and released a silent prayer. He turned to the third chapter and first verse of the book of Ecclesiastes. "To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under heaven," he said.

Chapter 4

The team celebration ended sharply at eleven o'clock that night. Todd's parents had graciously invited the entire team and friends to one of their restaurants for a night of milkshakes and hamburgers on-the-house. The majority of the team had church the following day and everyone was physically and emotionally worn out. Michael bade everyone goodnight, took Abby's hand and walked her to the beat-up Chevy pickup truck he affectionately called "Harriet."

Finally away from the crowd and inside the truck, Michael leaned in and gave her a long kiss. Abby felt weak. She used the manual crank and rolled down the window.

"You keep doing that, and you'll have to make me a respectable woman."

Michael smiled. "That's what my dad keeps telling me."

"Well, you ought to listen to the Reverend. But before you do, please continue to take advantage of me."

They both chuckled and embraced. Michael squeezed her tightly. Besides Todd, Abby was his best friend. He leaned in for another kiss. Halfway through it, Abby pulled away, slowly; regretfully.

"You had better get me home."

###

David Knight crept out of bed. It was 1:15 a.m. Tara was sleeping soundly and the entire house was quiet. He walked down the hallway and checked in on the children. They were both asleep; beautiful at rest as children always are. He thanked God and walked down to the small, extra bedroom that he used as his study.

David sat at his desk and leaned back in his chair, still riveted by the events at church earlier that night. He thanked God a second time and looked at his sermon notes tucked inside his Bible. “A Time and a Season” it was called. The people had responded to the message in a big way. If there was anything David had learned in his relationship with God, it was that He was unpredictable. God never seemed to send advance notice that He intended to show up at a meeting. That service had been no different.

David had been fired-up in the pulpit. He talked to the people about seasons and decisions, and that no one was guaranteed additional time: “We all have to make the best of the time we’re given. The place to begin is with the One who put us here in the first place. Salvation can only be found through His Son, Jesus, who is prepared to accept anyone who is willing to come.”

He could see by the look in their eyes and the involuntary nods of agreement, his message was reaching the audience. At the end of the preaching, as Jeremiah had taught him, David issued an invitation for all to come to Jesus. To his amazement (and delight) twelve people stood up and walked to the podium. All were broken and repentant as people are when the Lord is seriously dealing with their hearts.

One woman openly wept. She covered her face with both hands and sobbed loudly. Tara responded and placed an arm around her. Other church members gathered around the eleven other people who wanted to accept Jesus or rededicate their lives to Him. David didn’t have enough church members trained to assist the people who needed to conduct their spiritual business.

He took control of the situation, separating the folks at the podium into sub-groups depending upon their stated spiritual need and paired them up with trained counselors.

The rest of the church intently watched as he organized the groups of people. In the background the small praise team played a soft hymn. He remembered thinking that he could use Michael at that time.

To his right, the woman had stopped crying. She was speaking quietly with Tara, who had her arm around her shoulder, and wiping tears from her own eyes. Now organized, David stepped back on stage to close the service. He then ended the service with a closing prayer.

He encouraged the congregation to stick around, greet, and encourage all who had made decisions. Tara walked up to the podium and handed him the stack of index cards that recorded the names, addresses and decisions the people had made. David was already swooning under the demonstration of God's power when he glanced back at Tara who was staring at him with reddened eyes.

The card on top of the batch read: I Have Come to Accept Jesus Christ as My Personal Savior. The name on the upper right-hand corner of the card read: Elsie Sanchez.

David shook his head as he recalled the moment he read the words. Ramon's mother had come to the Lord.

Chapter 5

At the same moment Elsie Sanchez asked Jesus to forgive her sins and grant her a new season of life, Ramon Sanchez pulled his big Harley into the Faircloth Hotel in Kansas City. He had dropped Cindy at the apartment, made an excuse, and hit the freeway.

The swank hotel looked imposing, perched on a high incline in the heart of the city. He parked the bike and entered the ritzy lobby. Straight ahead, a clerk was working, head down and did not bother to look up. That was ok with Ramon, as he was looking to maintain a low profile. He wanted to get his business over with quickly, without being noticed.

He made a left by the nonchalant clerk and headed down a tastefully decorated hallway. The place looked like pictures he had seen as a child of Buckingham Palace. He thought: No wonder the clerk didn't look at me. I don't exactly fit in. That's all about to change anyway. One day I'll own one of these hotels. He then found his intended destination: Room 104.

Inside Room 104, Ramon's contact, Sonny Alvarado, was sitting in the living area with his feet hoisted on the center table. His alligator-skin cowboy boots glistened in the artificial light. Ramon was ten minutes late and that would make Sonny look bad. Ramon didn't know it yet, but there would be hell to pay.

Sonny jumped to his feet when he heard Ramon's rough knock on the door. He opened up, said nothing, but hurriedly motioned Ramon to get in the room. Ramon ignored his gestures, walked in and took off his sunshades.

"Nice place you got here, Sonny Boy."

Sonny turned and faced him. “Listen, Ramon, I don’t have time to play games. This is serious business, hombre. We ain’t in the service no more.”

“Easy, easy mi hermano.”

“Shut up and sit down over there,” Sonny said, pointing to an overstuffed loveseat.

Ramon obliged. Sonny looked nervous and agitated. Ramon had never seen him like this. They’d met in the Marines and became fast friends. Sonny had gotten out a couple of years before Ramon and tried to find a job enabling him to live a comfortable life. He learned quickly that without a college degree or a rich daddy, he was stuck with clerical or menial jobs that would never pave the way for his American Dream. He would end up like his parents, Mexican immigrants who died broke. No thanks, he decided and began considering *alternative* lines of business. Sonny hit the jackpot and now it was time to bring his boy Ramon in on the business.

This was the big day; the day that Ramon would meet Sonny’s boss, the man who ran the mid-western operations. Whoever he was, he was making Sonny very nervous. Ramon shrugged his shoulders, sat down and kicked his own feet onto the large center table. Sonny scurried to the back of the suite and knocked on the bedroom door. One minute later Sonny emerged from around the corner and nodded in Ramon’s direction.

A man stepped from behind the shadows and into the living area across from Ramon, who stood up slowly. The man was tall and muscular, with jet-black (probably dyed) hair. His face registered no emotion, although his broken nose made him look tough and intimidating.

Ramon had been around tough guys before and he was rarely afraid of anyone. But something told him that he was standing in the presence of a very dangerous man. There was no vulnerability about him. Ramon was sure that he was a stone-cold killer. He paused for a second, not knowing whether to fear him or *admire* him. Sonny's boss spoke first.

"Hello Mr. Sanchez. My name is Raul Diego-Vega. You will never again be late for an appointment with me."

Ramon hesitated, calculating whether he should cop an attitude or fire back a smart answer. He chose, instead, to be silent. Sonny was holding his breath and staring at the floor.

"Did I make myself clear, Mr. Sanchez?"

For the first time in his life, Ramon Sanchez backed down from a fight.

"Yes sir."

###

"God be praised!" David said in his heart. Ramon's mother had come to Christ. This would change everything. If she cried out to the Lord, in time, He would surely deliver her son. Ramon was like some of the others who had come forward tonight. He was just mixed-up and in need of a Savior.

David had quickly flipped through the decision cards and saw that most of the people were accepting Christ for the first time. This meant that God's hand was on the church and it would continue to grow. God had touched everyone in some small way that night, but none it seemed, more than Elsie Sanchez.

Tara had even given her some information on how to get connected with a recovery ministry for alcoholics. She was so excited about her newfound faith that she didn't want to leave the church. He had to remind her several times that since she'd given her life to God, He promised never to leave or forsake her.

She had asked him to show her where in the Bible that promise was written. He did and read her the words. Upon hearing the words of assurance, she wept again.

"Thank you Lord," she said, over and over.

Now seated in his study and rethinking the night's events, David once again turned to that familiar passage. God had been with him tonight and He had indeed promised never to leave or forsake any of His children. David felt a lump rise in his throat.

"Thank you Lord," he also whispered and trudged back down the hall to bed.

###

On the other side of town, Ramon Sanchez was restless in sleep. He slipped out of bed and out onto the tiny balcony of the third floor apartment. He lit up a cigarette and took a puff. He felt as if every part of his being was fully alive. How could he sleep at a time like this? He was about to become very rich.

He couldn't take any credit for the set up; that was all Sonny. But the business opportunity was brilliant in its simplicity. He would buy an eighteen-wheel hauler for which there was, as they say, *available financing*. His hauler would become a part of the fleet of the Great Neck Shipping & Logistics Company; a corporation owned and operated by Diego-Vega. At Sonny's direction, he would be paid to haul goods and materials all over North America for a handsome contract rate. He didn't have to do any

of the loading or unloading and he didn't need to ask any questions. If Sonny told him he was hauling onions, then, it was onions. If he said shoes, then it was shoes.

All he was required to do was show up at the required pick-up point and arrive at the specified delivery point, *on time*. Diego-Vega was very touchy about time. If he was ever approached by the authorities, he would tell them whatever speech Sonny had given him, and if that was not enough, the name and telephone number of the company lawyer.

If all of his deliveries were successfully made, on time, each month, on the last day of the month he would receive a thirty-five thousand dollar bonus. Simple, easy, and nice.

Sonny gave him his first thirty-five thousand dollar advance earlier that evening; a sign he said, of things to come. Ramon intended to never miss a delivery. He calculated that his annual take, including contract rate, bonuses, and the cut that he would have to kick back to Sonny, would easily be more than a half million dollars. In no time, he would be living like a king; the king of Ozark Falls.

Chapter 6

Michael's truck was parked inside of Abby's driveway for about five minutes when the kissing started again. In between, they talked about the future. Abby made it no secret that she intended to be a pastor's wife and had no interest in a career.

Like her mom, Abby firmly believed that a woman belonged at home where she could make a home for her husband and properly raise her children. The world was all messed up because parents had let down their children by selling out to the work world.

Abby and her siblings were raised by a full-time mom who had been there for every scraped knee and scratch. She'd taught them moral values, common sense and a love of God. Abby owed no less to her children.

What she couldn't properly decipher was what Michael wanted. They had both been involved in youth ministry forever. Michael attracted people like a magnet. The youth ministry at First Baptist had grown tremendously because of his presence. He had a gift for showing God to people in ordinary ways. He once drove forty-five minutes out of his way every Sunday for a year to carry a kid to church that was considering running to the streets. Michael had helped save that kid, but for him, it was just the way he was. No muss, no fuss.

It was also clear that Michael received the greatest response whenever he made an altar call at youth camp. His grandfather was a preacher, his dad was a preacher, and his older brother was a preacher. David and Jeremiah had both attended First Baptist Bible Institute while they served as pastors in churches. It was already December and Michael hadn't enrolled or said what he was doing.

She looked at the dashboard clock. “It’s late Michael. I’m wiped out. Plus I’m sure that we’re under nuclear radar right now.” They laughed.

“You’re right, I’m pooped.”

Abby stretched. “I can’t wait until the day we won’t have to go in separate directions.”

Michael thought: You don’t know the half, but said, “I know, babe.” He glanced again at the clock. “There won’t be anything left of you to marry if you don’t get in the house.”

“I’ll see you in church tomorrow.”

“Shhhh, but I think I’m skipping tomorrow. I asked Leroy to cover my Small Group for me. I knew I would be wiped out tonight, either way.”

Abby put her hand over her mouth in feigned shock. “Michael Knight, future Lead Pastor for First Baptist Church of Ozark Falls, skipping out on Small Group? I am shocked!”

Michael leaned over and kissed her on the forehead. “Out of my bucket, babe. Gotta crash, but not before I get home.”

“Don’t talk like that Michael. Call me when you get there.”

“You know I will.”

He waited until she was outside of his van and through her front door before driving away. He knew he’d done a bad job of side-stepping the marriage issue, but at least he was off the hook for tonight.

###

Abby stepped inside her home and slipped off her boots. She headed toward the stairs when her father, Lincoln Snow, emerged from their dining room.

“Hello, Abby. How was the game?”

“Hi Dad. We won. Can you believe it?”

“That’s great. How’s Michael?”

“He’s excited for the win. We were sitting outside for a while.”

“Yeah, *I saw you.*”

“And?”

“Abby, you have got to understand that I’m the chairman of the deacons at First Baptist Church—”

“And?” repeated Abby.

“And . . . I can’t have my daughter seen necking in parking lots around town, that’s what. Especially with the preacher’s son.”

“OK, Dad. It’s late. I don’t want to talk about this anymore,” Abby said, becoming visibly upset.

Lincoln pushed. “What’s the deal with Michael anyway? By this time David and Tara were practically—”

Abby’s eyes flashed at his implication. She turned and ran up the stairs.

Lincoln’s voice trailed off, finishing the damaging sentence; “Married already.”

He walked to the foot of the stairs and stood, suddenly feeling as if his tongue weighed 500 pounds. Abby had already slammed her door and was in her bedroom crying.

Deborah Snow stepped out of the dining room and walked past Lincoln. He was still standing at the foot of the stairs, in his bathrobe and pajamas, looking like a scared boy. She began to climb the stairs.

“Let me handle this, Deb.”

“Let me handle this . . .” she mimicked.

###

Jeremiah had never been able to shake the habit of waiting up for his children. He hadn't gotten a good enough opportunity earlier to tell Michael how proud he was as a father.

Michael had many athletic and scholastic achievements, but Jeremiah was more impressed with the man that he saw his son becoming. He'd found a great girl to build a life with. He was a leader in his school and church groups and God had given him the gift of preaching. Even if Michael didn't fully recognize it yet, it certainly was not lost on Jeremiah.

Over the past thirty-plus years of ministry, Jeremiah had been around many preachers; young and old. He'd been able to observe the best and the worst. He'd been watching Michael with his youth group duties since he was thirteen. The boy could lead people to Christ without even trying. The minute he began talking about God, eyes would start to well-up with tears and hands would go up to receive the Lord. It was uncanny. It was a gift of God, pure and simple.

In a gentle way, Jeremiah had mentored his boys over the years. He'd given them responsibilities in the church from picking up trash to helping him research and prepare his sermons. David had responded strongly to the call of God at the age of twelve.

Jeremiah listened to his message on the answering machine left earlier this evening about the powerful service at his church. That was typical of David. He seemed to always be excited about the Lord.

Michael, on-the-other-hand, was different. He was a terrific son and a good, wholesome kid. He was dutiful around the church and faithful to his roles, but he just didn't seem excited about the things of God. Over the years, Jeremiah had been watching and Michael had led many young people to the Lord. Other men would wear that knowledge with great pride or gratefulness. Michael didn't seem to even consider it—all in a day's work or something.

David also had fruit in his ministry. But whereas Jeremiah was sure that David would affect thousands through his ministry, over time, he was convinced that, for reasons known only to God, Michael was one of those rare individuals that came around once in a generation—the kind of individual that would lead *millions* to Christ.

Michael was the only one who could embrace his destiny; if Jeremiah's instincts were right. Michael would have to be the one to say, "Yes, Lord." Not his dad, not his friends, nobody but Michael.

Jeremiah hoped that Michael would soon give him his decision regarding the First Baptist Bible Institute; the school founded by Jeremiah's father, to prepare preachers on the job. That way, Michael could continue to get solid Bible teaching, coupled with practical church ministry under his guidance.

This program had worked great for him and David. In fact, David's church was now growing and could greatly use someone like Michael with such a strong background in

ministry. Based on the proximity, Michael could even split his time between the churches while completing the Institute.

Jeremiah was opening the refrigerator when he heard the familiar tinkle in the front door. He closed the door and walked toward the sound. Michael was taking off his coat when he emerged from the kitchen.

“Hey Dad, what’s up? What are you doing up at this time? Aren’t you preaching three messages tomorrow?”

“I suppose so. You’d think a guy with two gifted preacher sons could sit back and take life a little easier, wouldn’t you?”

Michael was cautious. “I don’t know about those *two* gifted preacher sons, Dad. David’s got the gift. I’ve got football fatigue and another killer in a week.”

Jeremiah was not known for taking a hint. “Well, remember football season ends next week. Then what?” he asked.

“I don’t know Dad. The Lord hasn’t confirmed my direction yet.”

Michael winced inside. He hated to play the “Lord” card, but he wanted the conversation to end quickly. Jeremiah was no pushover. If he wanted to make a point, he could debate all night. The only boundary that he would respect would be an honest “waiting on direction from the Lord.”

No arguments there, Michael thought to himself.

His instincts were right. Although Jeremiah was convinced of Michael’s destiny and needed nothing further, he acknowledged and respected Michael’s need to find his own way. He’d been around long enough to know that no man could outrun the Lord. Michael

was a terrific athlete, but he wasn't that fast. If the Lord was going to really use Michael, it was a done deal. In fact, he felt a little ashamed about pushing. He changed the topic.

“I hear you son. Listen, I know that you've already heard a thousand times what a great game that was, and it was. But I want you to know that I'm not just proud of how well you play ball or how you've done in school. I'm more proud of you as a person. You're a good man, Michael, and I love you.”

With that the two of them embraced. As much as Michael was conflicted about his future, he truly loved and admired his dad. His desire for Michael to follow in his footsteps was more than understandable. Deep inside, Michael wanted to want it. He'd put off making any decision by riding the fence for a long time. But he knew that the hour of decision was near and soon he would have to let everyone know. It didn't matter what his decision was; that did not take away from his love and respect for his father.

Jeremiah stepped back. He did not try to wipe the tears from his eyes. “Good night, Son.”

###

Michael closed the door to his room, warmed by the embrace, but still a bit ashamed about the cheap win that he'd just stolen. The truth was that he hadn't consulted with God about his future. He didn't even care to. His whole life had been spent in Ozark Falls, like his father and his father before him. He stripped down to his undies and fell heavily unto his bed. He longed to taste the world, to smell a different kind of air, to go beyond his current space.

In the tenth grade his science team won a statewide championship. He and two other representatives flew to New York to present their project at the Museum of Natural

History. He stayed in midtown Manhattan for three days and walked back-and-forth throughout the city. He visited the Statue of Liberty, Wall Street and the Empire State Building. He'd never felt more alive. It was in that great city that Michael made the discovery—a secret not shared with anyone. It was hidden from his family and friends, but always present in his thoughts. That weekend he became connected with what he was sure would be his life's purpose. He could remember every detail of the life-changing moment.

He was watching a news report in his hotel room about a corruption trial in lower Manhattan, when he caught a glimpse of a man who held his attention. It was only a sound bite of footage, but he could see a United States District Attorney, pleading passionately with a jury about its responsibility to send a message to organized crime in New York by convicting a local mob boss.

He looked to be about thirty-five years old and stood over six feet tall. He was nattily dressed in a navy blue suit, white shirt and power-red tie. His dark hair was closely cropped and he was in complete command of himself. With no fear, and a strong sense of contempt, he pointed directly to the defendant and begged his fellow citizens to deliver swift justice.

Michael stood and watched silently, even after the footage was over. His roommate was saying something, but he could only answer “uh hmm.” For the first time, he realized what was missing from the vision for his life he'd been handed. It was produced in a bubble called Ozark Falls.

He'd never been exposed to the real world and neither had anyone in his circle. He enjoyed the family ministry, for the most part, but he also felt that sometimes evil had to be confronted head on, just like that prosecutor did, with a finger pointed in its face.

Ever since that day, he pictured himself as the man in the courtroom—a warrior for the people, and felt, he was sure, the peace of God. He carried that warrior spirit deep within. It was what made him so competitive on the football field and in the classroom; at whatever he did. He was a warrior at heart. God made him that way.

He couldn't understand why being a lawyer was any less God-honoring than being a pastor. Being around ministry his whole life, he knew a little about spiritual warfare. But sometimes that seemed to amount to little more than church politics, busybodies and gossip, masquerading as prayer requests.

He turned on his bed, thoughts flowing. He couldn't explain it but he longed for *more*. He felt the call of God to go into the rough and wicked world and mix it up. Perhaps he would learn something valuable that he would bring back to his hometown in the future. Perhaps he would never return.

In either case, his time was running short. He'd applied to New York University Law School and a few others, and his answers would be coming soon. The entire town of Ozark Falls had laid out his life for him, in advance, it seemed. He didn't want to disappoint them but he feared disappointing himself even more. Was God now in on the conspiracy?

Isn't that what the voice in the end zone meant? "Before I formed you in the belly I knew you and have called you to preach—"

“Before you formed me in the belly?” Michael asked out loud and then sighed. It was a big game and a supercharged moment. Perhaps he’d been hearing things. Stuff like that was known to occur in stressful games.

He replayed the evening in his mind; the opening kick, the final play, the celebration, making out with Abby, his conversation with Jeremiah and *the voice of God?* Michael turned out the light and placed a pillow over his head. He was tired of thinking. If that was God, then he would drown Him out too.

Chapter 7

Two weeks later the long-awaited letter arrived. One week earlier, the Ozark College Rams had put up a brave fight against the Running Rebels, but the better team won. The *Ozark Times-Mirror* headline stated, “RAMS NEED NOT BE ASHAMED.” In what seemed like four lightning quick quarters, Michael’s football career ended.

Abby was different. For the past two weeks she’d been subdued and withdrawn. Michael, of course, knew the reason, but he wouldn’t budge. Abby was putting the same, not so subtle pressure on him to mold himself to her plans like everyone else in his life. He would play her game, but he would not cave in.

In a short period of time he would have to break the news to her—to everyone. He owed her that much, as difficult as that would be. He didn’t want to end their relationship, but he couldn’t see a wedding ceremony within the next couple of years as she probably expected.

Maybe she would end it. That would be harsh, but Michael had to be practical about it. It would take him a minimum of three years to complete law school, in New York of all places. He planned to live on tuna fish for most of that time, so frequent trips to Ozark Falls were out of the picture.

Ditto for Abby’s visits to New York City. Abby didn’t have that kind of money and their families would frown upon any unsupervised visits before marriage. Then of course, there was Abby. She already felt like an old maid at twenty for crying out loud. Before long, he was sure that Abby would be in search of another *champion*.

He didn't like the thought of their relationship splintering and eventually deteriorating, but he couldn't see the alternatives. He was sure that he loved her. But Abby was not enough to keep him in Ozark Falls.

Kathryn heard Michael come through the door and beckoned him into the kitchen. She pointed at a stack of letters on the counter and said, "I think something you've been waiting for is over there."

Michael ran over and grabbed the envelope. He tore it open. He was in. He was accepted at NYU Law School. The letter also said there was financial aid available.

Michael looked up at Kathryn, speechless. His face confirmed what she'd intuitively known for months. He would be leaving soon. Tears welled-up in her eyes; both for joy to see her boy get what he wanted so badly for so long, and for the sadness of eventually seeing him go.

Over the last year, as Michael confided his feelings about his future to her, she'd also allowed herself the occasional drift into the fantasy world. There Michael would wake up one day with a desire to attend First Baptist Bible Institute, and to become the youth pastor for David's church. He and Abby would be married soon and she would help out with the grandkids.

Of course, any such possibility was now out of the window. She had to prepare herself to give Michael full emotional support and backing. This wasn't going to be easy for him. He was big, strong and mature, but he was still so young. She ran over to him and hugged him tightly.

“This is such a wonderful opportunity for you Michael. I know that you will be successful at whatever you put your mind to. God has given you a brilliant head, and even a bigger heart.”

Michael hugged her back. “Thanks Mom,” was all he could say. But those words said it all. Kathryn was the only person he knew who didn’t want to push him in one direction or the other. She was the only one who seemed to want what was best for him and not for her.

Even Todd hadn’t understood his desire to leave town and make a bigger life for himself. As far as Todd was concerned, he would help his parents expand the restaurant business and then he would take over. He would marry some local gal and settle down nearby. To Todd, New York was like a foreign planet. His only concern seemed to be Michael’s sanity in jeopardizing his relationship with the hottest girl in Ozark Falls.

Michael looked Kathryn in the eye. She knew the question before he asked it. “Why don’t you let me talk to him, honey,” she said.

He hugged her again. He would eventually talk to Jeremiah, but he really needed someone to break the ice. In the meantime, he would have to have the conversation with Abby. That would be tough.

He went up to his room and called Abby. She picked up the telephone, still feeling hurt, but glad as always to hear his voice.

“Hey babe,” Michael said.

“Hey, what’s up? What’s it been, an hour? Can’t get enough of me, can you?”

“Never. Can I come by for a few minutes?”

“Sure. What you got?”

“Tell you when I get there.”

Michael ran out of the house in a blur. He jumped into Harriet and started the truck. He hadn't taken the time to gather his thoughts. He'd rehearsed this conversation in his mind many times. He couldn't remember the words at the moment. In life, as in football, sometimes you've got to wing it he thought, and then threw the old truck into first gear.

###

When Michael arrived at Abby's house, Lincoln Snow was in the front yard, examining something beneath the living room window.

“Good afternoon, Mr. Snow.”

“Hey, Michael,” Snow said, still intent on his project. “You may want to go through the side gate. Abby's out back with the dogs.”

“Thanks,” he replied, and went in search of his girlfriend.

Deborah Snow was an amateur dog breeder and Abby was her *de facto* assistant. As he came around the side of the house he could see Abby standing beside the huge oak tree in the middle of the yard. She had on faded jeans, a soft brown turtleneck and a tan thick corduroy jacket. Her strawberry blond hair was drawn in a ponytail. She looked absolutely beautiful. She could have been the poster child for America's Girl Next Door. She seemed to be studying a chart of some kind.

He stole up beside her.

“What's up doc?”

“Hey, you scared me,” she said.

Michael looked around quickly and gave her a quick peck on the lips. I'm going to miss that, he thought. Abby took his hand and led him toward the fence separating her parent's property from the neighbors.

"Alright, Knight, spill your guts."

Michael looked into her soft brown eyes. Maybe Todd was right. Abby would be married soon. He really needed his head examined. There was no easy way to say it.

"I've been accepted to New York University Law School."

Abby's face registered total bewilderment. "New York?" was all she could manage to say.

"I've wanted to talk to you about it for a long time . . ."

Abby looked at some trees in her neighbor's yard. Deep inside she'd known her dad was right. She was wasting time with Michael.

"New York?" she managed to say again.

"I didn't say New Zealand," Michael wanted to say. Instead, he reached out to take her hand. "I love you, Abby. I'll wait for you."

Abby looked back at him through teary eyes. She threw her arms around his neck.

"Oh Michael, I love you too . . . please don't go."

Now he wanted to cry. Maybe he shouldn't go after all, he thought. He didn't think he could handle much more of this. He stepped back and held her face in his hands.

"We can make it Abby. We'll have the summers. It may take a little longer for us, but this is what is inside my heart. You won't want the man I'll become if I don't take this chance."

Michael's words hit like a hammer. She knew they were true. She'd only been trying not to hear them all along. She looked into his eyes. He was right. If she loved him, she would have to let him go. If she loved him, she would have to trust. She'd taught this a hundred times in Sunday School.

"Trust in the Lord With all your heart. Lean not on your own understanding" the Bible said. Why was this so hard to apply to your own life?

She hugged Michael again. In a strange way she was relieved that they'd finally had the conversation. She felt like the last wall between them was now removed. What the hay? They would have a few wonderful months before he left. She would go with him and help him settle in.

She wiped her eyes and smiled. "It's alright babe. You're still my champion."

Michael smiled from ear-to-ear. This woman was definitely a keeper. They walked hand-in-hand to the house and said goodbyes. She stood on her front lawn and watched as Harriet chugged her way down her street. The reality of his leaving hit her hard again. She held back tears.

Lincoln Snow was in the garage foraging through an old cabinet. Abby walked in and said, "Hey Dad, you think we can end the silly argument?"

"Yeah, I think I can handle that. I'm so sorry Abby. My comment was—"

"It's alright Dad. Your thoughts were not that far from the mark."

Lincoln looked puzzled. "What do you mean?"

"Michael is going to be attending New York University Law School in the fall."

"New York?" he repeated.

For Lincoln Snow, a third generation plumber who had never been further away than Wichita, Kansas, Abby might as well have said that Michael was going to Sodom & Gomorrah University. He'd never known of anyone who had voluntarily gone to New York. In his mind, New York City, not money, was the root of all evil. More importantly, where would they find Abby a husband at this late date?

Lincoln didn't know what further to say. Abby kissed him on the cheek and went into the house. It looked like she was taking the news fairly well. He wondered what the Reverend thought about this New York business. There was no way he'd approve of it. Lincoln went back to his messy cabinet. He would definitely have to discuss it with Jeremiah prior to the deacons' meeting that evening.

Chapter 8

Jeremiah Knight arrived at First Baptist Church of Ozark Falls around four o'clock in the afternoon. Appointments would keep him from getting home for dinner this evening, so he bought a sandwich on the way in. He planned on wolfing it down between appointments and getting prepared for the deacons' meeting, which would begin promptly at 6:00 p.m.

Jeremiah had always felt that the Deacon Board was an important bunch. It was impossible for the pastors in any church to properly tend to all of the flock. The deacons were there to help minister to people and to help the pastors make decisions about the direction of the church. He quietly entered his office and sat behind his desk. Barbara Chambers, his secretary, brought him a stack of mail and messages. He put the hefty package at the side of his desk.

"Later," he said.

Jeremiah felt fortunate about the deacons in his church. They were committed and serious men who never seemed to allow egos and pride to obstruct the mission. Over the years, he'd heard nightmares about deacon boards who couldn't agree on anything and others that led to fist fights and church splits.

He was thankful for the levelheaded group in the First Baptist fold. They were a large part of the reason why the church had prospered greatly over the years. His one objection to the deacon situation was the length of the meetings. It didn't matter what policy they attempted to put in place, they just couldn't be held beneath four hours long.

He knew that he was a part of the problem. He needed every matter thoroughly briefed, discussed and prayed over. “The Lord deserves our best,” he would constantly tell his staff and volunteers.

An hour and a half later, he had eaten his sandwich and sorted the mail. He was making some notes for the upcoming meeting when Barbara announced Lincoln Snow. Jeremiah told Barbara to send him in. They were in the habit of meeting a few minutes before each meeting to iron out any wrinkles there may be. Jeremiah greeted him from behind the desk.

“Come on in Brother,” he said.

“Hi Jerry,” Lincoln replied.

Jeremiah went through a few pleasantries and then handed him the meeting agenda. “You got anything to add?”

Lincoln reviewed it slowly. “No sir looks like you got everything covered.”

“Alright then, I think I hear some of the men arriving next door. Why don’t we head into the meeting?”

“Uh, Reverend, do you mind if I close the door? I have a personal matter to discuss with you.”

###

After leaving Abby, Michael drove out to Lake Ozark to be alone and to think for a while. He parked under a tree and walked out to the lake bank. He’d always loved the big lake as a boy. He, David and their dad camped and fished there every summer for as far back as he could remember. He looked at the serene and beautiful water and the majestic trees stretching like a canopy in some parts, almost leaning into the lake.

“This ain’t Manhattan,” he said out loud.

He took out the acceptance letter and read it again, this time slower, both for his edification and *verification*. With the financial aid and the funds his parents had promised, *he was going!* He would, indeed, leave Ozark Falls and pursue his dreams. For months he’d bottled up his desire like a powder keg. He felt like he was carrying around an unpleasant secret. Now it was coming out and he could feel the release. He could feel the shackles falling off of his spirit.

He had won the ultimate championship. This was bigger than anything he’d ever experienced. Spontaneously, Michael broke into a jig, jumping and dancing around the bank. He figured he was alone, but he didn’t care if anyone was watching. After wearing himself out he sat down by the bank. The dreaded conversation with Abby had gone much better than expected. He meant it when he told her they would make it. New York was far away, but he wouldn’t give up on them so easily. Six months from now, he hoped Abby would feel the same way.

“Let’s cross that bridge when we get to it,” he said, and sailed a stone across the lake.

The bigger issue right now was Jeremiah; and, to a lesser extent, David. He’d known for months about their conspiracy to draft him into the Bible Institute and youth ministry. He’d simply played dumb and just kept waiting.

The night after his winning catch, David had called to congratulate him on the win. They talked very little about football. David couldn’t wait to launch into a sermon about the terrific service he’d experienced at Morningside that very night and all the things that God was doing with the youth. Michael was glad to hear the news, but it was always like

that with David. He sounded like the same broken record: “This is what God’s doing, little brother, and you better come get some of this action.”

“That’s awesome, David,” was all that he could say. It wasn’t that Michael didn’t care about the movement of God or about the people’s lives that were being changed by the Lord for good. On the contrary, he’d always loved his Small Group responsibilities and had seen many kids respond to his leadership and teaching. He also loved and respected David greatly. He just hated the constant pounding and the feeling that someone else was in control of his life.

In particular, Michael was glad to hear that Ramon Sanchez’s mother, Elsie, had given her heart to the Lord. God knows that family needed some healing. Maybe this would also lead to the mending of Jeremiah’s relationship with Cindy. Who knows what will happen, he thought. Sometimes God seemed to have a sense of humor.

He threw his last stone and stood to his feet. He was going to New York. It was a done deal. Dad would be home late from his deacons’ meeting tonight. “Atta boy Michael,” he said out loud. “Hit him when he’s tired.”

He jumped into Harriet and started her up. He would go see David and break the news in person; then he would drop by Cindy’s as well. She would be easy after the conversation he anticipated having with David. She’d always encouraged him to follow his heart. Cindy; always the rebel. If nothing else, talking to her would encourage him and he still needed a little of that.

Dropping by would also give him a chance to check in on her. He didn’t like the way she looked the last time he saw her at the game. Sure, she looked upset over the Ramon and dad feud, but personally she didn’t look well. Like her brothers, she had dark hair

and blue eyes. She was a striking beauty. On that day, her hair looked frazzled and her clothes; cheap. It seemed as if Ramon's GI money and her social worker's salary weren't making the grade. He spoke to Kathryn about it. She politely told him to butt out.

That was fine, but Cindy was his sister. Unlike most of his friends, he could see the good in Ramon. But he was no fool, beneath the surface, he knew there was also lots of bad. Cindy would enjoy the spontaneous visit. David, he had better call in advance.

He drove out of the park and dialed David's home telephone number on his cell. Tara answered and pointed him to the church. Michael drove there and parked beside David's Aerostar. With two kids and one on the way, it was starting to look a little small.

"One day," he said and entered the Ozark College modular building that doubled as Morningside Community Church. David was working with a couple of guys stacking foldable chairs in a corner. He turned at the sound of Michael closing the door.

"Hey Little Bro. Tara told me you were dropping by. To what do I owe this dubious honor? You know my salary, go ask Dad," he said smiling.

"David, I took Logic this past semester. I think there are a few other places that I would go if I needed money."

"When little brothers show up out of the blue, there's always a money motive."

"Aw, keep your filthy lucre."

They both started laughing. "You're a real comedian Michael . . . not! Don't quit the day job, alright. Unless, of course, you'd like to apply at Morningside Community. We're in desperate need for a youth pastor—"

"Hint, hint."

"Just saying—"

“You get your subtlety training from Dad.”

“You get your preaching gift—”

“OK, OK, OK—”

“What is it with you? Every time I mention anything about the ministry, you give me the ‘OK, OK, OK’ treatment. Dude, it’s December. What are you planning to do with yourself?”

Normally, this is where the conversation would break down and Michael would sigh and leave the room. It just wasn’t worth the argument. This time it was different. This time Michael felt a strange confidence standing before his imposing older brother. He was holding all of the cards.

“The answer to your question arrived in the mail today.”

David gave him a “what are you talking about” look and said, “Alright, enlighten me.”

Michael spilled out the words. “I was accepted to New York University Law School—”

“New York?” David replied.

That was all people from Ozark Falls seemed to hear whenever the name of his law school was mentioned.

“New York?” he said again. Slumping his shoulders and relaxing his stance, David looked stunned. He stared at the ground and his whole attitude softened.

Michael lost his defensiveness. He muttered on, “They’re also giving me a financial aid—”

David looked up with hurt in his eyes. He was, sort of, smiling.

Michael finished the sentence. “At a low interest rate.”

David walked over and hugged him. “I’m sorry, Little Bro. I know I’ve been a little hard on you.” David continued, “I’m not going to lie, I am surprised, and maybe a little disappointed.” Michael nodded assent. “But I respect your decision, Michael, and I’m on your side. I’ll be there for you Bro, if you need me.”

Michael looked at his brother with a newfound respect. David straightened up and put the jocular, big brother posture back on.

“With your speaking gifts and brains, Michael, you’ll make a great lawyer. Plus, clients will be attracted to you like a magnet.”

“Thanks David.”

“With the smell of that fresh Ozark Falls manure on your boots, I’m sure you won’t be able to keep them away from you in ‘ol Manhattan.”

They both exploded into laughter. They were brothers again. Everything would be okay.

“Well, I’d better get back to my chairs. Listen, you and me will have to sit down before you leave and go over some things, if you know what I’m saying.”

Michael was already walking out the door. “I’ve already seen the video, Love Doctor. Plus, dad has already fumbled that pass sufficiently, thank you very much.”

“Hey, I’m not kidding—”

“Hey, I know Preacher; that’s the scary part.” Michael let the door slam behind him and breezed into the parking lot.

Michael was halfway across the parking lot when the thought hit him: Dad! He had better tell David to clam up until tomorrow. He knew that they spoke several times per day. David would probably assume that Jeremiah already knew. He ran back into the building. David was talking to a worker. He motioned for David to come to the door.

“What is it now . . . you’re a CIA operative?” David said.

“Cute. I forgot to tell you. I haven’t spoken to Dad yet.”

“Well when do you plan on telling him Perry Mason—after your first trial?”

Michael rolled his eyes. “Mom’s going to—”

“You put Mom up to this? Have you no—”

“You seem awfully concerned about my moral bearings, lately.”

“Someone has to be.”

“You heard me, clam up,” he said and closed the door behind him.

###

Michael jumped into Harriet and headed toward Cindy’s. Abby had been a breeze compared to David. He knew that David was wounded but making the best of it. Maybe it would help him. At least now the pressure was off. He could begin looking for a real youth pastor.

In a way, the Jeremiah and David conspiracy was a wonderful fantasy. He would intern with David under the watchful eye and mentorship of his dad. They would build up a great church and one day form other churches. Soon, their own sons would walk in their footsteps. The Knight clan would raise up a dynasty of righteousness in a dark world. Everything was in place; the vision, the gifts, the resources—the Hand of God.

It sure sounded good, except for one small ingredient, Michael Stephen Knight; soon to be prodigal son. He sighed. How did he become responsible for the fate of the world?

He looked forward to seeing Cindy. She would understand. She would encourage him and lift him out of this mood. He jumped on the main road and sped toward her apartment.

Chapter 9

Cindy loaded the fancy shopping bags into the back seat of her new candy apple red BMW. Her feet ached. She couldn't wait to get home and sit in a warm bubble bath. Looking at the car, she praised God silently for Ramon's new job. It was a little cloak and daggerish, but it was good money. He was even paid a hefty signing bonus for taking on some extra work. This meant that he had been on the road nonstop for the past two weeks, calling in only here and there. She felt sorry for him and wanted him home, but the money coming in for a change was nice. Ramon had been out of work for months and had obliterated his GI resources. The new job was motivating him in a way she had never seen.

In no time, he had promised, she could go part-time over at the youth center. She could volunteer her time, but she wouldn't need to work. He gave her five thousand dollars to go shopping and told her to get rid of the shabby clothes. He was planning on moving up in the company and all of the executives and their wives dressed first class.

"Five thousand dollars!" she had exclaimed, at first. She'd never handled that much cash in a lump sum.

"It's all yours, baby," was Ramon's confident reply.

"I'm not kidding. I want you to get decked out. Do your hair, polish your nails; the works. This weekend, I'm rolling into town and we're going to a party in Richmond Heights, where the president of the company lives. We have to look like we belong there."

"Richmond Heights?" she asked.

“Yeah babe, Richmond Heights. Don’t worry. Within a year we’ll have our own pad in the Heights.”

Cindy smiled. Wishful thinking, she thought. Richmond Heights was the swankiest neighborhood in that part of town. From what Cindy knew, no house in that neighborhood sold for less than one million dollars.

The McBrides lived there. All of the other top professionals and business people lived there. People like her and Ramon were really not welcome. Todd McBride had once thought that he could woo her with its charms. But he was just a young snot; Michael’s best friend to top it off, and it wasn’t his money anyway.

Listening to Ramon talk, she allowed herself to fantasize about the Heights for a moment. She quickly dismissed the thought, but had to admit that mulling over living in Richmond Heights was better than worrying about what brand of peanut butter had coupons out that week.

Now, as she slipped onto the cool, leather seats and spied the bags filled with her new designer clothing, shoes, cosmetics and perfume, five thousand dollars seemed like chump change. She hadn’t even been able to buy any accessories for that money.

Chapter 10

Lincoln Snow gently closed the door to Jeremiah's office. He sat down across from him with a concerned look on his face.

"Jerry, I'd like to talk to you man-to-man for a minute. I'd like to just put aside the pastor and deacon thing if you would."

Jeremiah wanted to say, "I'm glad you can put away the 'deacon' thing. Slice me, my friend and I bleed 'pastor,'" but he just nodded and motioned Lincoln to go on. Jeremiah knew this had something to do with Abby and Michael. He trusted Michael and really didn't want to get involved in their relationship, but he had to listen. In the past couple of years of their relationship, Lincoln had pulled him aside for a few of these man-to-man talks. They were usually harmless and boiled down to Lincoln being over-protective of his only daughter.

Lincoln continued, "I want to be delicate here, Jerry, but Michael's decision to go to New York came as quite a surprise to Abby and me."

He said the words "New York" like he had bitten into a lemon. Jeremiah was stung but kept a poker face. "Go on," he said.

"Well, that was pretty much it. He came by the house and told us today."

Jeremiah's mind was reeling. He couldn't let on.

"How do you know his decision is permanent?" he asked, thanking God for the brilliance of the retort. The comment seemed to work. Lincoln looked down and tilted his head.

"I guess I never thought about that. I guess he mentioned something about financial aid—"

Jeremiah grunted.

“And Abby said that it was a done deal.”

Jeremiah stared at Lincoln with all of the calming reassurance of a long-time pastor.

“Lincoln, I have known you and Debbie for over twenty years. You folks have helped me build this church. I assure you, Michael’s intentions toward Abby are only honorable. It’s the only way he knows.” Jeremiah paused.

“Michael is a little confused about his future right now, but whatever direction he goes, I assure you that he will act in Abby’s best interest. I will see to that.”

Lincoln stood up and stuck out his hand.

“I’m sorry Jerry. It just took us by surprise. I was sure that they . . . you know . . . like David and Tara . . . you know.”

“I know, Lincoln. I’ll see you in the other room in a minute.”

Lincoln shook his hand, nodded and left the room.

Jeremiah collapsed in his chair. “Why?” he asked himself. Why hadn’t Michael said anything to him?

###

Michael pulled into the parking lot of Cindy’s apartment building. The three-story walk-up was clean, but far from luxurious. He looked at the red brick utilitarian structure. This definitely wasn’t how he imagined his sister would end up after college, literally shacking up with a crazy ex-Marine.

Cindy was always operating outside of the box, but she was certainly a looker. Perhaps some guys stayed away from the preacher’s daughter; probably thinking there

was a special place in hell for guys who goofed up those kinds of relationships. Cindy's attitude was probably just her way of telling the world that she was normal.

He didn't see her car anywhere. Ramon's Harley was also missing. He went up the stairs and knocked on her door. No one responded. He knocked again. Still no response. He looked at his watch. It was six o'clock in the evening.

"So much for the surprise visit," he said, and headed down the stairwell. As he placed his key in Harriet's door, he caught a flash of red reflected from the outdoor lighting. He turned. Some hot looking chick in designer shades was parking a candy apple red BMW in Cindy's parking spot.

"The sunshades at night thing is getting old. Maybe this chick is related to Ramon." He chuckled quietly.

Maybe he'd stick around for a few minutes and see what would happen when Cindy showed up. She hated pretentious little rich girls like this. She'd kick Buffy out of her parking space in about ten seconds.

He leaned against Harriet, watching.

"Get your butt over here and help me," Michael thought he heard Cindy's voice, say.

"Excuse me," he said and walked over to the car.

Cindy took off the shades. Her long jet-black hair had been quaffed into a short blunt French look and dyed blond. Her makeup was immaculate. She wore tan leather pants and a tan camel hair sweater. She smelled divine. She looked like someone from the cover of Cosmopolitan.

Michael's knees went weak.

"Cindy?" he asked.

###

As Michael stood in the parking lot struggling to find words to greet his sister, Jeremiah Knight was dialing home. Kathryn had to know something about this. He spoke with David earlier today and everything seemed normal. Cindy . . . well that was another story.

He waited impatiently for someone, perhaps Michael himself, to pick up the telephone. No answer. He hung up and immediately speed dialed again. No one picked up.

He hung up the telephone for the last time and stood to his feet. Leaving a message would be pointless; he would be in this meeting for the next four hours. Michael was going to some New York law school. He'd told Abby and her father that he was leaving town. No one had bothered to let him in on the news.

"Preposterous," he thought and picked up his meeting agenda.

Lincoln was always overreacting about something or the other. His relationship with Michael was stronger than that. Michael would have leveled with him.

"Enough of this second-guessing," he assured himself. He would get to the bottom of it all later.

Barbara buzzed his office. "Good night Reverend, I'm leaving for the day. All of the deacons are here."

"Thanks Barbara," he said, and scuttled to the meeting. He couldn't stand being late for anything.

###

Cindy spun around and struck a pose by her new car. Michael was still star struck but managed to say, “You look great.”

Cindy twirled some more. “Thanks, Little Bro. Let me know when you want to take Abby somewhere special and I’ll let you borrow the car.”

“Forget about the car. I can’t get over you—”

“Easy there cowboy. What was I before the makeover, chopped onions?”

“Aw, you know what I mean. The new car, the new . . . *you* . . . must cost some . . . you know, bucks,” Michael said, slightly changing the subject.

“More than you can imagine, Little Bro. Here, hold these. Let’s talk upstairs.”

They entered the apartment and Michael plopped down on the living room couch. Cindy sat across from him and put her feet up on a hassock.

“God, my feet hurt,” she said.

“That’s what happens when you shop til you drop, Imelda.”

“Ha, ha, don’t hate me because I’m beautiful.” She flipped her fingers through her new hairdo. They burst out laughing.

“Come on, spill your guts. Tell me all about your new found bucks.” Michael was now more interested in Cindy’s story than his own.

“Soon you’ll be moving out of this place and into the Heights,” he said in jest.

“You sound like Ramon.”

“OK, now you’ve really got to fess up. The last time we talked, you were a social worker and Ramon was unemployed. That, my dear sister, was two weeks ago. Now unless you hit the lottery—”

“We did, in a way. Ramon hit the employment lottery. He got a really good job with an international logistics company.” Cindy smiled.

“Logistics? Oh, you mean Ramon’s driving a truck?”

“Bingo,” she said and laughed. “He’s been working around the clock for the past fourteen days. I’m not complaining though. It gives me space and it’s primo money.”

Michael nodded his head. He’d heard that some independent haulers brought in a lot of dough, not Richmond Heights money, but decent enough. He got up and poured himself a glass of milk.

“I’m glad things are turning around for you and Ramon, Cindy. If this is any indication of your new direction, then I’m on board.” He paused.

“Any talk about getting hitched?”

“Pass me a diet coke, and butt out Jeremiah,” Cindy said.

Chapter 11

As Michael poured Cindy a diet coke, Ramon Sanchez was also pouring himself a drink. He was standing on the balcony of the penthouse suite at the Hotel Tropical in Montego Bay, Jamaica. He'd helped himself to the cash bar and was getting acquainted with Captain Morgan dark rum with coke.

On short notice, Diego-Vega had asked him to convey a message to a business associate on the island. Sonny was in Costa Rica and suggested that Ramon make the trip.

Diego-Vega was way ahead of Sonny. He liked Ramon from the first moment they met. He didn't like him in the way that most would think of that sentiment. Rather, he liked certain qualities he perceived in him: deep hunger and reckless fearlessness. He could see Ramon teetering on the brink of defiance during their first encounter. He'd backed down, foolishly, not based on fear, but based on *hunger*. These qualities would serve him well in the business. They would serve Great Neck Shipping & Logistics even better.

He gave Ramon one simple instruction: meet a man by the name of Paulus Chin at the Hotel Tropical, hand him a package in a sealed, brown paper envelope and tell him simply, "This is the final offer, or prepare your funeral." There would be no discussion. Simply deliver the package and the message and be back in Kansas City by the following day. Upon his return, he would earn one hundred thousand dollars in cash.

Ramon stared across the open stretch of beach, lined with palm trees. It was evening now and low lantern lights lined the beach. He sipped the Captain Morgan.

“You’re a long way from Ozark Falls, hombre,” he whispered. Perhaps he would bring Cindy down here, once he’d earned his money.

Rap, rap, rap went the knock on the door. Ramon put down the drink, stiffened up military style, and walked toward the door. “It’s on,” he said.

On the other side of the door stood Paulus Chin, one of the Caribbean’s most notorious gangsters, and a trained killer. He was prepared to assassinate anyone who threatened his territory.

###

Michael decided he would let Cindy slide on the marriage question for now. She’d made a quantum leap ahead in two weeks. He changed the topic.

“Did you hear about Ramon’s mom?”

“David called me.”

“What did Ramon have to say about it?”

“I can’t repeat it; wouldn’t be ladylike.”

“Oh, I take it they don’t get along?”

“That, my handsome little brother is an understatement. Why don’t you tell me what’s going on with you these days. We didn’t get to talk the other night.”

Nice right turn from the Elsie Sanchez topic, he thought.

“I received an acceptance letter from New York University Law School today.”

Cindy’s eyes sparkled. “No way!” She inhaled.

“I’m dead serious.”

He took the letter out of his pocket and handed it to her. She read the contents, and then ran over and jumped on him.

###

Ramon collected himself and opened the door. Putting on his best street strut and voice, he turned and walked across the room, his back to his guest. From what he could tell, the lithe Oriental dude in the white linen shirt and slacks didn't look so tough.

“Pour yourself a drink and join me on the balcony,” he said.

Chin paused in the center of the room. His eyes fanned out throughout the suite as if checking the place for a potential purchase.

Ramon stood, back turned, on the balcony overlooking the ocean. The package was sitting on a chair to his left.

“This is my show. Let him come to me,” he said in his heart.

Chin walked toward the balcony. Ramon was standing there, resting his drink on the railing.

He'd never seen Ramon. Sonny had described him to a tee. He looked at the back of the man's head and thought that he was either a very good actor, stupid or dangerous. He wondered whether if he should more thoroughly check the room. He knew that an ambush was not outside the bailiwick of Raul Diego-Vega.

Chapter 12

“You did it!” Cindy said. “You really did it.” Michael laughed.

“You’re the first Knight to make it out of Ozark Falls.”

“I’m not trying to make it out of Ozark Falls, Cindy. I just want to live my own life.”

Cindy became serious. “Congratulations, Little Bro. I thought I would be first, but I’m proud of you. When do you leave?”

“In eight months.”

“Then you’ll have time to take Abby for a spin in the new car.”

“I’ll take you up on that. I better get out of here. Tonight is the big showdown.”

Cindy read his expression. “You haven’t told Dad, have you?”

“Nope.”

“I’ll pray for you hon,” she said walking him to the door. “Call me tomorrow, if you’re still breathing.”

“Yeah, pray for me.”

Michael fired up Harriet and drove out of Cindy’s driveway. “Oh yes, I’ll be taking you up on that offer,” he said, passing by the new car.

Kathryn would be home by now. They would have to debrief on the dad project. So far, he’d been through Abby, David and Cindy. Three down, one to go.

He wondered how Abby was doing. A few hours had gone by since their conversation. Maybe reality had sunk in and she was now bummed out. He dialed her number. “Not home,” Debbie Snow said, nothing more.

“Oh boy, it’s started already,” he muttered, and drove on through the night.

Driving past Lake Ozark, Michael could not have known that Abby was parked almost exactly where he'd earlier been. This was the place of their first kiss, the place where they escaped from the world when they needed to.

She didn't want to make Michael into something he was not. She didn't want to get in the way of his dreams. But there were lots of pretty girls in New York City, lots of sophisticated girls. Michael had always been a gentleman, but put a rugged, six foot two inch athlete like him in Manhattan, and he would be down for the count in a week.

Even with Abby, her best friend Rachael had said that he would only last for two years, max, before they would *have* to be married. She looked into the sky and remembered the old hymn her mother used to sing to her as a child, "How Great Thou Art." She sang the melody in her heart. She whispered a prayer for Michael. "Oh God, how great you really are. Please guide and protect Michael upon the path he's on, and if he is really mine, then keep him for me. In Jesus' name, I pray. Amen."

There, in the night sky, overlooking the lake, God displayed His greatness and answered her back in her heart that He was still in control. She took comfort, hopped in her Beetle and sped home.

###

Ramon also took a strange comfort from the Caribbean sky. In less than a half day he would be one hundred grand richer. Not bad for a day's work, he thought.

He was born for this. The man standing behind him didn't scare him. He knew this was his first major test and he had no intention of failing it. He also knew it had come very quickly into his tenure and that was good. He'd seen it in Diego-Vega's eyes. Sonny

was a good guy, but he was soft. He wasn't prepared to do what was necessary if asked to. Ramon was.

What Ramon didn't know was that the sniper perched on the roof of the Hawthorne Hotel had his high-powered rifle locked onto his chest. His partner was sucking a Ting soda through a straw, while watching Chin carefully with night vision binoculars for the appropriate signal.

Ramon also didn't know that the outcome of this meeting was highly undecided. Chin and Diego-Vega had been involved in a turf war for over a year. They had negotiated the turf down to one final payoff. If Chin didn't like what he saw in the brown package, Ramon would be immediately executed and disposed of. No one would ever hear from him again.

Diego-Vega would have no remorse. This was a choice that Ramon had made. The payoff, in the event of success, was enormous. There were a thousand Ramons who would jump to stand on that balcony in Jamaica on this starry night.

Chin joined Ramon on the balcony.

Ramon turned and faced him, his back to the sniper. No longer in practice mode, the sniper aimed the rifle and lined up a clean shot at Ramon's head.

###

In Ozark Falls, Cindy had just tried on the Armani dress that she intended to wear to Diego-Vega's bash that Saturday night. She hadn't heard from Ramon all day, which was strange. If he could see her now . . .

"You're a knockout, Chick," she said to her image in the mirror.

###

Raul Diego-Vega was sitting in the private study of his mansion in the hills of Richmond Heights. His grandson Charlie was bouncing on his lap. He'd been waiting to hear from Ramon. It was now about eight o'clock and he hadn't heard anything from Jamaica. He hoisted Charlie a little higher. Chin couldn't possibly want a full-blown war. With his contacts in the various governments, he would punish Chin swiftly and severely.

His wife, Miranda, came and took her grandson.

"Bedtime," she said.

###

Ramon picked up the package and handed it to Chin. With ice in his voice, he looked directly into Chin's dark eyes. He tried to peer into the man's soul.

"This is the final offer, mi amigo," he said slowly. "Either you take it or prepare for your funeral."

Chin looked at Ramon, then beyond him in the general direction of the snipers and began laughing. He laughed so hard, he had to sit down on a balcony chair. At his signal, Ramon would disappear from the face of the earth. And here it was, this petty criminal was giving him orders? He snickered and opened the envelope.

He stared at the contents for a long time, and then placed them back in the envelope. Atop the Hawthorne, the shooter placed his finger on the trigger.

Chin ran his right hand through his slick dark hair.

That was the signal. The shooter squeezed the trigger. The gun did not fire.

Chin signaled the shooter again. The gun was still stuck. He turned to Ramon.

"You a gambling mon?"

Ramon tried to stand tough. His legs had been trembling, half out of fear and half out of the realization of his payday.

“I play to win,” he said.

“You win the lottery today, my friend, and Merry Christmas too.”

Chin eased through the door. The snipers had already packed their equipment and quietly left the area.

Ramon poured another drink.

Now in his study, alone, Diego-Vega poured one too.

Triumphant, Ramon took out his telephone to call the boss man.

Diego-Vega was pleased. Ramon could pick up his compensation tomorrow afternoon.

Ramon smiled. He had much to smile about. He would later come to know that it was God alone who had graciously granted him another day.

Chapter 13

At 9:30 p.m. Michael called Abby. He had already gone over the Jeremiah game plan with Kathryn. Michael decided that he would deliver the message to Jeremiah himself. It would not be easy, but the other discussions that day had strengthened him. He knew that Jeremiah would be disappointed, but he also knew that, ultimately, he would also give him his blessing. Jeremiah would not allow Michael to go forward without his blessing.

Abby picked up the telephone on the first ring. Michael was relieved to hear her soothing voice. To his relief, she sounded normal.

“Hey babe,” she said.

###

Jeremiah ended the deacons meeting early. He had done everything in his power to concentrate on the meeting but he couldn't. He tabled a few nonessential issues and mercifully let everyone out one half hour early.

He pulled into his driveway and quietly slipped through the front door. Kathryn was watching television in the den. She turned to him, startled.

“Jerry, you're early tonight.”

“Yeah, I put the troops out of their misery for a change.”

“I saw Michael's truck out front. Where is he?”

“Upstairs . . . he wants to talk to you . . . us.”

“I heard.”

###

Michael hung up the telephone with Abby and made his way toward the staircase, leading downstairs. As he descended the stairs, he heard his father's voice; coming from the den it seemed. "He's home. Here goes nothing," he whispered to himself.

###

Kathryn stared intently at Jeremiah. "What do you mean by that?"

In a rare move Jeremiah raised his voice in frustration.

"I mean, I heard Kathryn. I heard that Michael is going to law school in New York and that he's even got financial aid lined up, for crying out loud! I take it you've got a little insight you'd like to share with me that the rest of the congregation doesn't know!"

Jeremiah was a Baptist preacher of the fire and brimstone variety. His voice boomed through the house and fell on Kathryn like thunder. Kathryn froze, unafraid, but ashamed. She knew what this meant to him and she felt his embarrassment as her own. Jeremiah had told himself that he would play it cool and let Michael and Kathryn explain the situation to him quietly. It had been a long night at the church. This was not going as he'd planned.

Michael stood frozen at the base of the stairs. How did he find out? Who told him? David, he thought. The rat . . . couldn't keep his mouth shut. This meant war.

Jerry took off his coat and threw it across a chair. Kathryn's eyes were asking the question, "How?" Jerry answered before she could ask it.

"I heard about it at the deacons meeting tonight. Lincoln Snow was concerned about Abby's future."

“Mr. Snow,” Michael said under his breath. “Snow ran right to church to have it out with Dad.” He could hear him now, “What are Michael’s intentions, Reverend?”

“Intentions about what?” his dad would say.

“Intentions about Abby, now that Michael is moving to New York.”

“Ouch,” said Michael, and squirmed. What could he possibly say to make this right?

###

Cindy finally got around to that bubble bath she’d promised herself when the telephone rang. It was Ramon.

“Hi Honey,” she said, glad to hear from him. “Where have you been?”

“I had to run a special mission down South, but I’ll be home tomorrow.”

“That’s great. I can’t wait to see you.”

“Me too, babe. Did you get the stuff?”

“Of course. I spent you dry Sanchez. I hope you like what you see.”

“I can’t wait.”

“You sound like you’re in a good mood.”

“Things have been going good with Great Neck. Make sure you get the very best for Saturday.”

“I wasn’t kidding before. I blew the five grand without getting everything on my list.”

“No problem, I’ll give you five more when I get in town tomorrow.”

“Five more? Are you gambling, honey?”

“You sound like a little Oriental fellow I just met.”

“Seriously, where are you getting the money?”

“I told you, I’ve been running a lot of extra missions. The commissions add up. It’s very important that you look the part on Saturday. I’m just willing to spend a little to make the right impression. We’re going to the Heights, baby.”

Cindy smiled. Who was she to argue with that? So Ramon was a little spend-thrifty now. They had time. This was the time to have fun and enjoy life.

“You’re so sweet,” she said. “I’m sorry you have to sleep in the ratty cab of a truck tonight.”

“That’s alright babe. The truck is the bread and butter for now. Within six months, I’ll be in the executive suite.”

Cindy smiled again. Her man surely could dream. Nothing wrong with dreams, she thought. Things had changed so dramatically for them in the last few weeks. Maybe Ramon was right.

She would enjoy returning to the mall tomorrow, BMW, new hairdo and all.

“Good night, babe,” she said, still feeling sorry for Ramon.

“See you tomorrow,” he replied.

Ramon stretched out his feet in the oversized Jacuzzi in the penthouse suite of the Hotel Tropical. Room service had delivered a delicious meal. There was a cruise ship parked right off the coast with an excellent casino. He sipped his Captain Morgan.

He couldn’t wait to similarly taste the Jamaican nightlife.

###

Standing at the foot of the stairs, Michael felt like a fool. He wanted to be mad at Lincoln Snow or even Abby, but he couldn’t. He should have gone to the church and told

Jeremiah himself, today. He should have told him about his real intentions long ago. He'd known them for a while now; he'd been putting off the inevitable.

He sucked in and walked into the den. Jeremiah and Kathryn were seated across from each other. Kathryn looked concerned. Jeremiah looked plain tired.

“Mom, may I speak to Dad alone a bit?”

Kathryn stood up and walked out of the room. She gave him a reassuring smile and a squeeze on his arm. Michael sat down across from his dad.

“Dad, I don't know what to say. It wasn't supposed to go like this. I had planned out a whole speech. I never intended for you to hear about this through the grapevine—”

Jeremiah came to his rescue. “It's okay Michael.”

“I know Dad, but—”

“No, I mean it. It's okay. I respect your decision. I would lie to you if I said that I didn't want things to go another way, but I can accept this—I have accepted it.”

Michael stared at the ground, not knowing what to say. Jeremiah had been such a great man all of his life. He had every right to be mad right now, but he was giving him pure grace. Michael walked over and put his hand on his shoulder.

“I'm going to make you proud of me, dad. I'm going to be a great lawyer one day.”

“I'm already proud of you Michael. You're already great in my eyes. I'm packing it in for the night. Let's talk details in the morning; like what you're going to eat, besides hot dogs and pizza.”

“Is there anything else?”

Jeremiah stood up. “I love you son.”

“I love you too, dad.”

The older man slapped the younger on the back and padded down the hall. Michael sat down on the couch and blew a long breath. It was finally over. His dream was becoming a reality. In the back of his mind he still heard God's voice, but he was learning how to block it out.

Chapter 14

Ramon Sanchez stood by the front door of his apartment, waiting for Cindy to emerge from the bathroom. “Let’s go, babe,” he said, remembering his boss’ dislike of tardiness of any kind.

This was the biggest event of his life and he would not be late, under any circumstances. He’d never actually been in anyone’s home in Richmond Heights before. He longed to take his place among the elite.

“If you’re not out in ten seconds, I’m leaving—”

“You can’t rush perfection,” came the muffled voice from the bathroom.

Ramon smirked. If nothing else, Cindy was entertaining. Her new look was a knockout. He would proudly show her off tonight. Ramon Sanchez, the proud papi of the preacher-man’s daughter.

“Ten, nine, eight, seven, six—”

Cindy flew the door open and cat-walked through their tiny living area.

“How ya like me now, Sanchez?”

“I like, I like.”

And he did. Cindy’s short blond hair and purplish-blue eyes were a stunning combination. The black Armani dress suit and pumps were immaculate. Her accessories looked just as expensive as they were. She was cover-girl material. His money was well spent.

She walked by, planted a kiss on his cheek, and slipped through the door. Ramon took one final glance at himself at the mirror on the wall, through the open bathroom door. He too, was dressed in basic black. His signature sunshades were in his hand.

He winked at himself in the mirror and closed his front door behind him.

###

Elsie Sanchez kept telling herself that the pastor had encouraged her to call her only son. For three weeks, she had dialed his number and then hung up. She had said her speech over and over out loud, but she just couldn't seem to get it to sound natural. Every time she spoke, her words hung in the air.

"Hello, Ramon, this is your mother," she would say and then burst into tears. She felt unworthy to use the word, "mother." How could she expect him to accept her, when she did not believe her own words?

"Hello, Ramon, this is Elsie."

She recoiled at those words too. "Elsie" was what he called her during the years of abuse and neglect. Her new Bible promised that she could do all things through Christ who would provide the strength. She needed it now.

She dialed the telephone number and held the receiver, hands trembling. She locked her stare on the fourth chapter of the book of Philippians on the table in front of her. This time she would go all the way. This time she would not hang up.

###

Ramon turned the key in the lock of the front door to his apartment. The telephone began to ring. He glanced at his watch and at Cindy, disappearing down the hall. Could it be Sonny, or- Diego-Vega himself?

His job was to be on call at all times. What if there was a change of plans? What if Diego-Vega needed him to handle something on his way up to the Heights? That made no sense. This party had been planned for weeks. Plus, Diego-Vega and Sonny always

contacted him via cell phone. He checked his pocket. He'd left it charging in the bedroom.

Ring-Ring-Ring, went the telephone inside the apartment.

Cursing under his breath, Ramon twisted the key in the other direction and hustled into the room.

###

Elsie was about to hang up the telephone when she heard the voice on the other end.

“Hello, this is Cindy and Ramon, please leave your message at the tone.”

She tried to speak.

Ramon paused, listening.

Cindy stood in the doorway waiting.

The voice trembled. Then, barely audible, it said, “Ramon, this is your . . . mother. Uh, if you get this . . . uh, message . . .”

Ramon had waited for this moment. Cindy had told him about her phony conversion down at the hypocrites' church. He'd been waiting to tell her how he felt about her, the church and about Jesus.

Now, however, he was even more ticked off. On this, the most important night of his life, she had called and was about to make him late. She was about to make him look bad in front of Diego-Vega and the other company executives. She had come back from beyond the grave to rob him again.

Ramon felt the blood surge to his head like a charge of lightning. His knees shook and he too, trembled, but in rage. With savage power he slapped the telephone from the

kitchen wall. It sailed across the cramped room and exploded against the refrigerator. He let loose a scream that got the neighbor's attention.

"My mother is dead, you stinking witch," he panted.

The neighbors peered into the hallway.

Cindy stood still, terrorized.

###

On the other side of the line, the answering machine seemed to suddenly cut off, mid-sentence. That was fine, she reasoned. She didn't know what to say. It was probably better this way. A message would be nonthreatening. It would probably warm him up for the next time.

When that would be she didn't know. God had given her strength for this night and she quietly thanked Him for it. The pastor had said to take it slow; one day at a time. Don't expect too much at first.

She continued where she'd left off in the fourth chapter of the book of Philippians. "Yet it was good of you to share in my troubles," the Bible said.

###

Cindy stood speechless in the doorway. She'd seen Ramon angry before, and he refused to even discuss his mother. But this display was different. For the first time, the thought crossed her mind that Ramon might actually be unstable.

What if things didn't work out between them; what if she failed him somehow. She didn't want that kind of rage poured out on her.

"Hey slugger," she said. "You look like you could use a drink."

Ramon had been looking down at the ground. He looked up.

“Oye, the party; let’s go,” he said, suddenly Ramon again.

Cindy felt somewhat relieved.

Strutting across the room, he collected himself and put his sunshades back on. It was time to focus on his future.

Chapter 15

Ramon swung the BMW deftly through Richmond Heights. He didn't want to draw attention to himself but then again, he didn't care. The only thing that mattered was getting to the party on time.

The cops would go easy on the traffic here on a Saturday, anyway; too many poor little rich kids who may complain to their rich daddies. Ramon spat out of the window. In no time at all he would be right there too. Speeding past the sprawling homes and mansions, he thought to himself: Guess who's coming to dinner, rich folks? A little salsa with your salad, Madame?

He pulled into the address on the piece of paper. Tall metal gates opened automatically and they drove down a long cobblestone driveway. There were tall hedges on either side of them. In the distance, spread out like a medieval castle, stood the home of Raul Diego-Vega. In the subtle, designer lighting, the home looked majestic. Diego-Vega would later tell Ramon that the lighting in his home alone cost well over one million dollars.

Ramon had never seen anything like it, except in books. Cindy gasped. They pulled in to the end of the driveway. Valet parkers greeted them and took the car. Cindy looked at Ramon.

“I told you Cindy, this guy's got class.”

Upstairs in his study, Raul Diego-Vega watched his guests arrive. There was much to celebrate. He'd solved the Caribbean situation. His partners in New York were satisfied and his new protégé had just arrived.

###

On the other side of town that night, Michael noticed that Abby was pensive. They had rented videos and were sitting, feet up, in his den. It had been roughly a week since his announcement and it seemed like life was getting back into order.

It was a little strange at first, but even Jeremiah and David were talking about recruiting a new youth pastor. Michael found it hard to sleep at night. As the time wound down, he was drawing closer to Abby, but he was also drawing nearer to his new life, in a way.

Todd appeared to be conflicted about his departure. There were no high fives or any “I’ll come visit you every weekend.” Just “I’ll miss you bud, and don’t worry, I’ll take care of Abby until you get back.” Michael had declined his offer.

Abby leaned closer, “You know I hate gangster movies.”

“Without gangsters, there wouldn’t be lawyers Ab. I’m looking at this as an investment in our future.”

“Oh God; you already sound sleazy. Couldn’t you at least wait until you got to New York?”

“The United States Constitution guarantees certain rights to all citizens, even alleged gangsters.”

“Michael, please . . . I won’t marry a sleazy lawyer—”

“That’s an oxymoron, babe.”

“Michael, I’m getting worried about you.”

“Be very afraid.”

###

Diego-Vega greeted Ramon and Cindy with what could almost be considered warmth. He introduced them to his wife Miranda, and then to Sonny and his noticeably younger wife, Kristal. It was the most relaxed that Ramon had ever seen him.

Ramon stuck out his hand, "Hello Mr. Diego-Vega, this is Cindy Knight."

"Yes, I know of Ms. Knight. Her brother was the hero in our almost championship season."

Cindy felt uncomfortable. "Oh, you know Michael?" she asked.

"Who doesn't? The papers were filled with pictures of the young Mr. Knight. I know of some people who will remain nameless who won a small fortune on that catch. The Rams were not supposed to win that game."

"Oh, so you're a betting man." Cindy was beginning to dislike Diego-Vega.

"Oh, never. I made my small fortune the hard way . . . one brick at a time." He turned to Ramon.

"Come, I must introduce you and your lovely date to some of the company executives. Excuse me, Sonny."

Kristal guzzled her rum and coke, peered at Sonny and rolled her eyes. Sonny twirled the drink in his hand, staring at the back of Ramon's head.

"So now your friend is being introduced around and we're left standing here like nobodies. Wasn't it you who brought him in, Sonny?" said Kristal above the din.

"Shut up," Sonny hissed, and grabbed her arm.

"You keep your mouth shut," he said again. "I'll deal with this."

###

Mackenzie Stone was bored out of his wits. He couldn't stand company parties. Necessary evil, he thought and casually sipped a gin and tonic. Standing alone near the bar he'd gotten a number of looks. No thanks. I think I'll pass on the tired, midwestern mobster chicks. After I wrap up a few business items tonight, I'll be happily aboard the company jet back to Manhattan, home sweet home, he thought.

Two ladies stood at the other end of the bar pretending not to notice the immaculately dressed attorney.

"That's him," one whispered.

"Oh, really? He doesn't look like George Clooney at all. He's more like Richard Gere."

The bartender motioned for another.

He refused, tipped the man heavily and headed toward the patio. Walking directly toward him was Raul and Miranda Diego-Vega. Accompanying them was a frightened looking thug, he was sure, and the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen in his life. The night suddenly became a whole lot more interesting.

###

"Promise me you won't be a sleazy lawyer, Michael," Abby said, seemingly concerned.

"Aw, come on Ab, what's the law without a little sleaze? That's like peanut butter without jelly; Batman without Robin—"

"Ozark Falls without Michael Knight . . ."

They both tensed.

"I'm sorry," Abby said.

“Don’t apologize. Let’s watch the movie.”

“I *am* sorry, Michael. I’m good with this now.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Michael said, more than a little annoyed. He was tired of apologizing for his dream.

His departure couldn’t arrive fast enough. He clicked play on the DVD machine.

###

“Ramon, I would like you to meet our company’s Chief Legal Counsel, Mack Stone,” said Raul Diego-Vega. “And this is his lovely date, Ms. Cindy Knight.”

Ramon hurriedly shook his hand and grunted something.

Stone ignored Ramon and looked intently at Cindy. Cindy looked back. She wondered which Hollywood studio had let him out of his contract. She stuck out her hand. He looked in her eyes and held her hand a little longer than necessary.

Looks like Sir Lancelot is digging the do, she thought and smiled.

Stone continued to ignore Ramon and gave his full attention to Cindy. It was clear that he wanted her and Ramon to know that he was interested and there was nothing Ramon could do about it.

Diego-Vega read the situation and stepped in.

“Mack, I need to talk business with you in my office in five minutes.”

Stone got the picture.

“I’ll see you in five,” he said. Perhaps Ozark Falls was not such a bad place after all.

###

Diego-Vega turned to Cindy. “Ms. Knight, if you don’t mind spending a few minutes with my beautiful wife, I need to steal Ramon for a few minutes.”

“No problem,” Cindy said. “He knows how to find me.”

Diego-Vega put his arm on Ramon’s shoulder and led him down a long hallway.

“I would like you and Sonny in attendance at that meeting in three minutes,” he said as he looked at his diamond-encrusted watch. Please find him and ask an usher to show you to my upstairs office.”

“Yes sir,” Ramon said.

###

Inside Diego-Vega’s office, the men stood apart waiting for him to speak. He didn’t disappoint.

“Gentlemen, I am glad to report tonight, that business is exploding. This will be an excellent year for all in this room.”

They all tilted their glasses. Diego-Vega went on.

“Sonny has been doing some work in the islands that’s been going very well. I want him to continue in those efforts. At the same time, he’s to train Ramon to assume his responsibilities here locally. Ramon will continue his transport services, but these will be more in the line of special deliveries, while he trains.”

Sonny looked shocked as if hearing the news for the first time. Ramon swallowed in pride, but didn’t look at Sonny. Stone looked annoyed as if anticipating the next sentence. Pointing to Ramon and Stone, Diego-Vega continued.

“This means that you gentlemen will have to work more closely together. Sonny is going back to Costa Rica in the morning. Mack, I will need to meet with you and Ramon in my office at around 9:00 a.m. Don’t be late.”

With that, Diego-Vega arose and left the room. “Enjoy yourselves,” he said on the way out. “I can’t keep the guests waiting.”

Sonny glared at Ramon. This punk is trying to take my job. Sure, send Sonny out to Costa Rica while flyboy moves into the executive suite. So this is the way Ramon Sanchez thanks his friends. I never did trust that smart mouth, Sonny thought.

He walked out of Diego-Vega’s office heading off to find Kristal. He would need to get some sleep for the long flight. He was also afraid of what he might do to Ramon and his own future with the company, if he stayed in the room. There would be plenty of time to deal with him in the future.

Back in Diego-Vega’s office, Stone was also glaring, but for different reasons. He thought of the gorgeous blonde in the black Armani. How did a greasy punk from *Ozark Falls* get a girl like that? He swirled the drink in his glass.

“So, is it serious?” he said, looking at Ramon.

“Pardon me,” Ramon pretended not to hear his question.

“You and the nice young lady out there. Are you serious?”

Ramon bristled. “I don’t think that’s any of your—”

“Let me explain something to you son, I am vice president and general counsel to this company. I report only to Mr. Diego-Vega. I’ve been his right-hand man for fifteen years. *Everything* you do from now on is *my* business. Do you understand me, *hombre?*”

Ramon stood silent. His head throbbed with rage. He wanted to put his boot in Stone’s pretty face, to beat him with his fists until he was bloody, but there was so much at stake. He looked at the wood-paneled walls of Diego-Vega’s stately office and the heavy gold-framed paintings.

“Yes sir,” he managed to say, with hot tears beneath the surface.

Mack Stone sat on the edge of Diego-Vega’s desk and paused as if delicately choosing his words.

“Get the hell out of here.”

Ramon spun and left the room. Stone walked behind him and out into the hallway. He leaned against the massive railing overlooking the great hall below and watched him descend the stairway. He whispered something to the blonde and she rose to leave.

Cindy was her name he recalled. He gave a waiter his glass and took another cocktail.

“Here’s to us, Cindy,” he said, raising his glass.

In six months, Ramon Sanchez would be a memory. In six months, he and the lady would be sipping cognac together on the company jet.

###

Ramon was silent on the way home, but he was dreaming. As the BMW wound its way through the Heights, he could feel the hot anger subside to a quiet, burning desire in his gut. Cindy was bored and falling asleep. He hadn’t been exactly talkative when he left the mansion.

As he cruised by the sprawling homes and manicured lawns, he told himself to be cool. Diego-Vega had been true to every promise. He’d kept every word. Now it was going to be his turn to prove himself. He couldn’t have asked for a better mentor. Raul Diego-Vega was everything that Ramon wanted to be; rich, powerful, and deadly.

In a few months, he would have enough to get a small, but fancy enough place in Richmond Heights. Spending a little more time in the front office now, he might get to

know some important insiders. Life had not been roses. But this was his time. No one would get in his way or stop him. *No one*. Not even the slick, company lawyer.

###

Across town, Michael watched Abby sleep. He wondered if she was dreaming. He was wide awake in his—dreaming about court cases and gangsters being brought to justice. He thought of skyscrapers, Wall Street and Washington Square Park in the heart of NYU. In just a few short months he would fly away, finally free.

Chapter 16

Six months later Michael was staring out the window of the commercial jet. He was squeezing Abby's hand, mesmerized by the New York skyline. Kathryn and Debbie Snow sat in the row directly behind them, nervously preparing themselves for landing.

Michael couldn't believe the day had finally come. He fought hard to contain his excitement. Abby also felt the exact sense of disbelief, although it was tears that she was struggling to contain. The plane touched down and soon they were fighting their way through the throngs of people at Kennedy International Airport. Michael walked fast and hard, almost pulling Abby along. To Abby, the entire scene was surreal. She felt as if she were watching a movie. She couldn't remember ever seeing that many people in such a frantic place. Michael kept moving. Kathryn and Debbie struggled to keep up.

The breathless party arrived at the baggage claim. Michael pressed into the crowd that was encircling the baggage carousel. He tried to tell the ladies to step back, but several loud announcements drowned his voice. He smiled, gave them a thumbs up and peered over the crowd.

"He looks like a native already," Debbie said.

Abby rolled her eyes and ran her fingers through her hair. Debbie gave Kathryn a mesmerized look just as a burly passenger rammed his tote bag into her shoulder.

"Ouch," she said and spun around to take a look at her assailant. They could barely see the back of the man's head, as he made his way through the crowd. Abby smiled.

"Did you see that, Kathryn? He didn't even say 'I'm sorry.'"

"Are you okay?" Kathryn asked while placing her hand on Debbie's shoulder.

Debbie had exited the airplane and entered the Big Apple with a look of sheer terror on

her face. She was in *New York* and nothing could have prepared her for the eclectic blend of humanity that seemed about to crush her. She had seen these things on television.

Something goes wrong and; *stampede*. She would never make it back to Ozark Falls.

She felt like Lincoln had been right about something for the first time in his life. Gripping Kathryn's hand, she tried to follow the back of Michael's head, praying silently that the Lord would not return and find her in Kennedy Airport. What kind of man would clobber a lady with his bag and not even say a word?

"When is our return flight?" she asked as Michael grabbed the first of their many bags.

###

One hour later, the four of them were jetting through Manhattan in two taxis that were supposed to be driving in tandem. In the back seat of the fastest moving taxi, Michael was staring out the window, not realizing that he hadn't said a word to Abby. Abby was lost in her own world, taking in the city sights, strangely excited by the pulsating rhythm of the city.

Debbie Snow could not have seen it coming. Sitting beside Kathryn in the taxi just ahead of Michael and Abby, she suddenly felt her neck jerk forward and then snap back against the hard plastic headrest. The driver had swerved to avoid hitting a parked truck and pulled up hard behind a white stretch limousine. Kathryn jerked forward too, but braced herself with her hand.

"Oh sugar," said Debbie. This was the second time she'd been assaulted without warning since arriving in New York City. It had only been a little more than one hour.

Oh God, would Abby have to live in this God-forsaken city one day? She asked herself. “God forbid it,” she said, under her breath.

Kathryn was not enjoying the bumpy ride, but she’d determined to make the best of the trip. This was Michael’s time and she didn’t want anything to take away from it. She knew Michael was disappointed that Jeremiah hadn’t been able to make the trip. He’d been feeling tired more often than usual and he’d gone to see his doctor.

The doctor didn’t want anyone in the family to panic, but tests were needed to determine whether Jeremiah’s cancer was recurring. So far, things looked good. Kathryn tried not to make a big deal about the illness or about Jeremiah’s absence. Michael said that he understood.

She looked out her window and there he was, smiling and waving at her through his taxi’s window. Somehow her driver had pulled alongside Michael’s cab and the taxis drove parallel down Broadway. Michael looked like a toddler again. Like when Jeremiah would drive away with him, David and Cindy in the back of their Plymouth station wagon. Those were precious times.

Five minutes later, the taxi came to a jerky stop in front of a plain looking high-rise. Michael’s cab had also stopped twenty feet ahead. The driver popped the trunk and opened his door. “We’re here,” he said. “That will be forty-five dollars.” Debbie looked at Kathryn aghast. She’d never paid for abuse.

Michael dragged his bags into the lobby of the large brick building. Abby grabbed what she could and soon the party of four was riding the elevator to the nineteenth floor. Coach Parker had helped Michael work with the Fellowship of Christian Athletes to find

a Christian kid who Michael could room with. They would live off-campus and split the rent. The boys were both football players, so there was some common ground.

The roommate, Ned Baker, seemed nice enough over the telephone. Kathryn had felt a sense of peace working out the arrangement with Ned's parents. The strong Christian influence made all the difference.

The party removed Michael's things from the elevator and made their way to his door. From behind the door, a loud rap song was blasting. The heavy bass-line seemed to vibrate the floor and walls. Behind the door, the angry sounding rapper barked his lyrics over a deafening bass line.

Michael didn't look back. He already knew what everyone's face was saying. In Ozark Falls, nice Christian boys didn't listen to rap music and they didn't play it so loud it could cause a medical condition. This kid was alright after all, Michael thought.

He banged on the door. The only reply was from the rapper on the stereo. Michael choked back his laugh. By now, Debbie Snow had turned pale white. She kept telling herself that Michael was a minister's son and Kathryn was the woman who led her to Christ. She felt as if Michael had signed a contract with Lucifer and they were all now standing at the precipice of hell. She hooked her arms in Abby's and began to pray.

Michael hit the door harder this time and the volume of the music dropped. A voice hollered back, "Come on in." Michael pushed the door and standing in front of him was a young man, about his height and build, with long, dark brown hair.

"Hey man, come on in. I guess you're my roomie," he said with a big grin. "My name's Ted Danforth."

“I’m Michael Knight, good to meet you Ted.” Michael smiled and looked at Kathryn. He didn’t need to state the obvious. This was not Ned Baker.

###

Kathryn stepped into the room and put on a bright smile. “Hello, son, I’m Michael’s mother, Kathryn. This is Debbie and her daughter, Abby.” Debbie and Abby smiled.

Ted immediately stuck out his hand to shake Abby’s. He smiled and said, “Hey Abby, welcome to my city.”

Abby looked at Michael. Five minutes in the city and his roomie was already hitting on his girl.

Kathryn broke in again. “Ted, are your parents here with you today?”

“No, my dad dropped me off yesterday. He has a major trial pending on the West Coast; some Beverly Hills society chick axed her husband. Dad had to fly out right away. Not very good manners, if you ‘ax’ me.” Ted grinned.

“What about your mom Ted?” Kathryn persisted.

“My parents are divorced, ma’am. My mom lives in Amsterdam with a sculptor. He’s pretty famous, Andres—”

“Oh, I see,” said Kathryn, becoming a bit flustered.

It had been a long morning and a long flight. They hadn’t yet checked into their hotel or even eaten. They’d almost lost their lives getting to the apartment. Now, a longhaired rapper with no parental guidance had supplanted the Eagle Scout and Christian athlete, Ned Baker. It did not look good.

Kathryn continued. “Ted, I’m not sure how to tell you this, but Michael was supposed to be sharing this room with another young man. I’m afraid that he is also arriving today and—”

“Baker isn’t coming any more.”

“He’s not?” said Kathryn and Michael simultaneously.

“My dad cut this deal with the admission’s office a couple of days ago. I think Baker switched to another school at the last minute. My dad pulled some strings, and boom, it’s me and Mike.”

Michael cringed. All of his life he’d been known as Michael and never could get used to being called Mike. Kathryn cringed too. What could she do? School would be open in a few days. It would be virtually impossible to find alternative campus housing for reasonable rent. The boy seemed like a nice kid. Who wouldn’t be a little messed up with parents like his? Michael would be a positive influence on him. He’d always been able to connect with troubled kids. Maybe he would lead this young man to Christ.

“Which bedroom is yours Michael?” she asked.

Chapter 17

Six hours later Kathryn and Debbie had departed to their hotel downtown. This came at a huge cost. Debbie tried to drag Abby to the elevator, but Abby stood her ground. This would be her last twenty-four hours with Michael in a long time and no one would get in her way. Forty-five minutes into the argument a deal was struck. Abby could stay with Michael until 10:00 p.m. at which time Michael would taxi her to the hotel.

Michael unpacked most of his things and took Abby for a walk. It was summertime in New York and a humid eighty degrees. Michael took Abby's hand and the couple stepped into the hot New York streets. Before long they were wandering through Washington Square Park.

All of a sudden the city became green. Street side vendors dotted the sidewalk and people were everywhere. There was a water fountain and children riding by on roller skates. The scene looked like a carnival. Michael was walking fast again. Abby didn't notice. What caught her attention was the endless stream of young women littered throughout the park. The women had dressed to match the steamy weather.

Abby felt as if she were watching a movie. She could feel the beginnings of a headache. Michael's heart was pounding. The sounds of the honking horns and the smell of burnt sausages were in the air. He was now in the city and he could feel the city somehow edging its way toward him, inviting him in.

Abby sensed his excitement. It made the headache worse. In twelve hours she would be headed home. Michael would be alone in New York surrounded by every shape of young woman imaginable. She wasn't from New York, but she was no fool. She'd seen the looks that Michael got. In surfer shorts, sunshades and Birkenstocks, he looked great.

They walked for a while not saying anything, each lost in thought. Abby nudged Michael's arm and led him to a park bench underneath a massive tree.

"This reminds me of home," she said.

Michael took off his sunshades and looked around. In a strange way the setting was familiar. The tree they were sitting under reminded him of the oak tree in Abby's backyard; the same tree under which he'd told her he was leaving town. He was sure she was thinking the same thing.

"Dang it's hot; I don't think it's so sticky back home," Michael said, feeling awkward, and making small talk.

Abby leaned her head against his shoulder. She closed her eyes. For an instant they were in Ozark Falls. Michael was the local football star and soon-to-be youth pastor. She was captain of the cheerleading team and his girl. She was happy.

A Frisbee sailed by and Abby opened her eyes. Michael was struggling for something natural to say. He understood how Abby was probably feeling. She would be going back to teach elementary school. Michael would be having the time of his life in Manhattan.

He felt a twinge of guilt for being so happy. He wanted to be sad for Abby's sake, but it was hard to suppress his excitement. Any attempt at acting like he didn't want to be where he was at that moment would be transparent. He'd spent a long time faking everyone out and he was no longer up to it.

He didn't doubt his love for Abby. Even in the excitement of beginning his dream, he was starting to miss her. He paid no attention to the young women eyeing him when they first entered the park. He would wait for his woman.

But she would also have to be patient. His decision was not about her or about the survival of their relationship. It was about becoming the person buried inside. To get there, he needed to be alone. He threw an arm over Abby's shoulder and drew her close.

"I love you baby," he said.

###

Jeremiah Knight stared at the papers in his hand. Dr. Carlson sat behind his desk and stared at him over thin, metal-framed glasses. Jeremiah had been to this place before. The tests showed a recurrence of cancer. He'd not wanted to believe that was the root of his recent pains and tiredness.

He'd fought and beaten the disease before, but it was bloody. For the past five years it had been in remission and his prospects of a full recovery looked great. Dr. Carlson said all the right things, but his face told the story: get your papers in order. You may dodge a bullet once, but not twice.

Jeremiah sighed. At least Kathryn was away this weekend. He would spare her the bad news as long as he could. Dr. Carlson indicated that with treatment there was a high percentage he would recover.

The treatment would begin soon, which meant he would have to notify the congregation and his staff. His Associate Pastor, Edward Monroe would have to assume some additional responsibilities. David would help out too.

Notifying the congregation was a mixed bag. On one hand, he knew that the recurrence of his illness could shake the church. On-the-other-hand, he had pastored that flock for more than three decades. His people cared, and because they cared they would pray without ceasing.

He was also certain that as God's people prayed, God would hear those prayers and He would answer. He was sure that his previous state of remission was a gift from God—some additional time to see his church flourish and to see his children grow up. He would leave it up to Kathryn to tell the children. He wasn't good at talking about his condition.

Jeremiah rose to his feet and shook the doctor's hand. The doctor's face articulated all that needed to be said.

This time however, he spoke gently. "See Christine on the way out Jerry. She will give you a prescription for some temporary relief."

Jeremiah nodded and went through the door. He suddenly recalled a favorite Bible verse: "I will lift mine eyes to the Lord from whence cometh my help."

Chapter 18

The following day it was time for the ladies to head home. Michael had spent the night on Abby's hotel room couch. She packed quietly and soon they were all standing at the airline departure gate

Michael hugged Abby hard, lifting her off her feet. "I'll see you in a couple of months," he said.

She nodded in agreement. He then hugged Kathryn who held his neck and said through tears, "I am so proud of you Michael . . . your dad is too."

"Tell the big guy I'm going to be fine," he said. Kathryn smiled and followed Abby through the gate.

Debbie also gave Michael a warm hug. She'd known him his entire life it seemed. She was sure that he was still Abby's-husband-to-be. In fact, she'd learned that top graduates from Michael's law school could earn a starting salary of \$175,000 per year or more. That was obscene! That was more than three years' salary for Lincoln, who had worked hard since his teen years. In New York, everything seemed to be turned on its head. She released him and headed toward the comfort of her departing flight.

Michael watched the women disappear down the hallway. He'd talked tough but he could feel the tug at his heart. For the first time he was alone in the city. He looked through the big plate glass window and observed the plane on the runway. He would miss them, but they were flying back to the past. He had to now concentrate on his future.

He grabbed a cup of coffee and headed toward the subway station. He was on his own now and had to count every penny. He trudged across the airport and caught a train toward his new life.

###

Ramon sat behind the large desk in his new office at Great Neck Shipping & Logistics. Sonny had been permanently relocated to South America and Ramon inherited his responsibilities. He immediately redecorated the office.

Taking over from Sonny helped him to understand why he'd failed to move rapidly through the company. He'd kept his office in a ratty condition that, in Ramon's eyes, spoke of his potential. He would not be like Sonny. His office would look like where he was going- to the top.

He hated administrative duties like filing paperwork and answering petty questions from drivers fanned out all over the land. He much preferred the thrill of sitting behind a rig and being the biggest dog on the road. He could go anywhere; sleep anywhere. It made him feel free.

The office, however, also had its benefits. It gave him a sense of stability and of moving up in the world. People like Todd McBride thought that they were the only ones who could work in an office or run a company. Ramon shook his head. He was so tired of the "daddy's boys" who got handed everything in life. Soon they would know there's a new player in town.

He'd already begun to make his move. In one week, he and Cindy would move into his new townhouse in Richmond Heights. He could have bought the place cash, but Mr. Diego-Vega had counseled him to opt for traditional financing. It was never a good idea to attract any attention in the logistics business. Ramon was being groomed for greatness and a part of greatness was learning the art of temperance, Diego-Vega had said.

The telephone interrupted Ramon's musings. It was Eva, Diego-Vega's secretary. "Mr. Diego-Vega would like to see you upstairs, immediately," she said. Ramon jumped to his feet.

###

Cindy and Kristal Alvarado had become friends, of a sort. With Sonny's transfer to South America, Kristal was, as she put it, bored silly. At Ramon's insistence, Cindy quit her job at the youth center and now only volunteered a few days per week.

Sonny asked Kristal to keep an eye on Ramon in his absence. She was glad to oblige by befriending Cindy and having some laughs along the way. She enjoyed sleeping late, long lunches and spending Sonny's cash. Cindy helped to break up the boredom.

Today they were shopping for furnishings for Ramon and Cindy's new townhouse in the Heights. They took a limousine into Kansas City and found their way to the designer showroom of Cambridge House, where Kristal heard that rich people shopped. They would shop for the new house, have lunch in town and be back at her place by late afternoon.

It didn't hurt that Cindy was buying a townhouse and not the seven-bedroom palazzo that she and Sonny occupied. That meant for now, she held the upper hand. Sonny had been in the business much longer than Ramon. His years of service meant something. Nevertheless, she was convinced that one day soon Ramon would be Sonny's boss. Maybe this little friendship would yield something helpful about Ramon. Kristal liked her lifestyle and wasn't prepared to easily part with it.

###

Ramon took the elevator to the top floor of the building and entered Diego-Vega's penthouse office suite. He was seated in a dark leather sofa that flanked his humongous desk. He looked concerned, but that wasn't necessarily telling. He always looked that way.

"Sit down, Ramon." Ramon sat.

"It looks like we have the rumblings of some trouble once again in Jamaica."

Ramon looked puzzled.

"It looks like Paulus Chin did not take my last message to heart. It was reported to me this morning that he approached one of our franchisees about moving some product through his channels."

Ramon sat silent.

"That was not a part of the deal that was struck the last time that you were in Montego Bay," he said, his face reddening.

Ramon shook his head. He, in fact, had no idea what the arrangements were with Chin. As in all of his dealings, he was merely a messenger carrying out orders. His mantra was: any questions; call Mack Stone.

As he thought about Stone, he felt a wave of anger. He'd been impossible to deal with, downright hostile. Their lines of responsibility had seldom any reason to cross. However, it seemed that Stone always invented some reason to call the office and pull the Vice President card. Ramon gritted his teeth.

Diego-Vega went on. "Ramon, it is no secret that I see much potential in you. You remind me of myself when I was your age: hungry, aggressive and eager to get ahead."

Ramon nodded his head humbly. This was the greatest compliment he'd ever received.

“Not everyone has what it takes to make the necessary sacrifices to really make it in life. I have observed you these months Ramon and I know that you have what it takes.”

“Mr. Diego-Vega, I was born for this,” Ramon replied with passion. “I'm prepared to go the distance.”

Diego-Vega stood to his feet and walked behind the majestic desk. He reached into a drawer.

“Then Mr. Sanchez, I have good news for you. The greatest obstacle that stands in the way of your immediate success is Paulus Chin. I'm told he is living in the penthouse of the Hotel Excelsior, on the north coast of Jamaica. As you know, he doesn't keep his word.”

Ramon nodded in agreement.

“I don't think he can be reasoned with,” said Diego-Vega and handed Ramon a piece of paper. “Those are some friends of ours in Montego Bay. See them when you get in town. They will help you arrange anything you will need and transportation back to the States.”

Ramon took the paper. His heart raced. He didn't like the little man in the white outfit. How likely was he to survive two meetings with that fellow? He shrugged off doubt. A job needed to be done and he was the man for the job. He shoved the paper in his pocket.

“My partners, important men, are depending upon you Ramon. Clearance of this obstacle will open up channels of unbelievable wealth.”

Ramon almost gasped.

“Wealth, my son, which belongs to *you*.”

Ramon walked across the room and shook his hard, calloused hands.

“I won’t fail you sir,” he said and turned to exit the office.

“Oh, just one other thing Ramon.”

“Yes sir.”

“This relationship with your girlfriend Cindy. How can I say . . . your arrangement is not befitting of a fast-rising executive in this company.”

Ramon stood somewhat puzzled.

“Miranda and I have been married for forty-one years. We have grandchildren and a legacy together. All of the other top executives in this company are the same.”

Ramon nodded.

“Son, you must learn how to navigate this game. Cindy is a beautiful and respected member of the local community. I understand that her father is a well-known reverend.”

“Yeah, but they—”

“It does not matter son. Jeremiah Knight is respected in this area. I have heard him preach myself. I don’t believe in all of his views, but he has a powerful influence over people we need.”

Ramon was beginning to understand. The Great Neck enterprise was not just about doing the job and making a fast buck. It was also about fitting in and flying below the radar. He looked at Diego-Vega.

“What should I do sir?” he asked.

“Marry that girl, immediately upon your return from Jamaica,” Diego-Vega answered.

Ramon stared at him. He was always right. He had landed the preacher’s daughter, but he hadn’t appreciated the value of his prize. Now he was beginning to understand. Of course he would propose. He would buy her the biggest rock ever. He thanked Diego-Vega and left his office, surprisingly excited by the suggestion.

He entered the elevator and rolled his fists into balls. Diego-Vega had come right out and said it. He didn’t have to guess anymore. He would become a top player in Great Neck Shipping. He would receive the respect he deserved. He stepped off the elevator. But first there was the nasty business of a certain killer by the name of Paulus Chin.

Chapter 19

Cindy signed off on the delivery receipts. The whole thing had cost her just under seventy five thousand dollars—a steal. She'd saved a ton of money, according to Kristal, by allowing her to design the space and avoiding know-it-all professionals. She had, after all, taken a few taken interior design courses.

In the limousine the duo decided to skip lunch and headed back to Richmond Heights. They'd taken longer than anticipated and Kristal had to catch a late afternoon flight.

“So where are you going?” Cindy asked, bottled water in hand.

“New York City,” Kristal said.

“Oh really, that's nice. My younger brother Michael just started law school in New York.”

“Really? That's great. I just love the city. In fact, I'll be there on a little legal business myself.”

“Long way to go to review your will,” Cindy joked.

Kristal laughed out loud. “I don't have a will, girlfriend. You can't take it with you—”

“So you had better spend it down here,” Cindy said, reciting Kristal's favorite line.

“No, I'm handling some *company business* in Sonny's absence,” Kristal said with an air of one-upmanship.

“Oh, excuse me,” Cindy said. “Company business.”

“Yes, dear, I am meeting with our esteemed Vice President and General Counsel—”

Cindy's head snapped. "Mack Stone," she said, instantly intrigued but seriously *worried* for her friend.

"He wants to review some of Sonny's projects. I have nothing better to do, so I guess I'm messenger girl."

"Well, be careful, if you know what I mean, messenger girl." Cindy was a little uneasy that she was feeling . . . could it be, jealous? She dismissed the thought. Stone was a playboy. She was perfectly happy with Ramon.

"Oh, I suppose you've heard of the Mack Stone legend," Kristal said.

"Let's put it this way, we've met."

"Oh that's right, at Mr. Vega's big party. You guys had the royal treatment that night. Did Mr. Vice President make a move?"

Cindy reached into her bag. "Do me a favor. I'll call you in an hour with the specifics. Go see my little brother and give him this." Cindy handed Kristal five hundred dollars in cash.

"He's just starting out. I'm sure this will help buy some peanut butter." They both laughed.

"Is he cute?" Kristal asked, eyes beaming.

"On second thought, give me back the money. I'll wire him the funds."

Kristal laughed again. She was sure that Cindy had gotten the picture. Stay away from Mack Stone.

Chapter 20

Michael arrived at his apartment building within an hour. He felt a sense of accomplishment, as if he were already learning his way around the city. Ted's usual barrage of loud rap music met him at his front door.

Inside the apartment Ted was watching television and bopping his head to the beat. Michael walked in and hand-signaled for permission to turn down the stereo. Ted nodded and Michael sat down on a window ledge. The bright sunlight beat against his back and the sound of the New York streets played a chorus.

"Free at last," Ted said grinning ear to ear. Michael paused.

"I wouldn't say *that*."

"What would you say?"

"I'd say tomorrow is the first day of classes. Aren't you even going to review your text books?"

Ted burst out laughing and almost spilled whatever beverage he was drinking onto the sofa. "Siddown, young man," he said. "Let the master show you the ropes."

"Yes, master."

"Ah, good student," said Ted in a bad oriental impression. "I hail from five or, maybe six generations of lawyers. I mean going back to England and all that. I've lived with every breed of lawyer there is. My dad knows every important lawyer, judge or elected official in this city; which isn't saying much because all of the judges and most of the elected officials are lawyers."

"Go on, oh master," Michael said.

“We are *really* going to get along. Let me continue. You, my apprentice, are now enrolled in law school. You see that window you are sitting in?”

Michael looked back. “I see it.”

“Good. I want you to open it and throw everything you ever learned or experienced in high school or college out of it.”

Michael rolled his eyes.

“Go ahead, just open it up and throw out all your previous ideas. This is law school and it operates according to a completely different set of rules. Your success in this institution will not be determined by how smart you are, how rich or poor, or by your mental elbow grease.”

Michael was waiting for the payoff. “So tell me, master, what is my success dependent on?”

“Success in law school, Grasshopper, is determined by your ability to grasp the rules of the game and then play within them.”

“And the rules—”

“I would tell you that, but I’d have to kill you.”

“Ha ha,” Michael responded.

“In all seriousness, Michael, your success here will be determined by how well you take one exam in each of your subjects in December of this year; plain and simple.”

Michael pondered what he was saying. He hadn’t really thought about it, but there was a grain of truth in Ted’s statement. There would be no tests, written reports or homework of any kind in any of his subjects. He and his classmates would be given an

enormous amount of reading in each subject. He had spied the reading list, and at the end they would all sit for a final exam.

As Ted explained it, the final exam score was the grade for the course; win, lose or draw. A bad day? Too bad. Nerves? Sorry. Not a good tester? Tough. That was the law school game. Pass final exams with flying colors; you're golden. You get invited to Law Review, plum job offers and big bucks. Fail the final exam or under-perform in some way and you're dog meat.

Michael looked at his law school guru. "So what is your suggestion, oh master of all law school wisdom?"

"Ah my pupil," he said and slid a cardboard banker's box across the parquet wood floor. "Open it up, Grasshopper."

Michael stooped down and opened the box. It was a stack of neatly typed papers with rubber bands all around them.

"What is all of this?" Michael asked, not sure if he really wanted to know any more.

"That my, good Grasshopper, are copies of all of the final exams in all of our subjects for the past five years, with excellent answers and analyses, by the finest legal minds Manhattan has to offer."

Ted reclined and folded his hands behind his head. Michael flinched and placed the cover back on the box. Disappointed, he slid the box back across the room.

"I'm not judging you friend, but there's a name for this where I come from," he said with no trace of humor. Ted, on-the-other-hand was laughing hysterically. Michael was tiring of the game now.

"What's so funny Ted? New York too sophisticated for my country morals?"

“Probably,” Ted said. He relented a little, seeing the pain in Michael’s expression.

“Ease up, bud,” he continued. “These aren’t *current* examinations. They were all taken from the Law Library, where they’re placed on file for anyone to see every year. Think of these as practice exams. I copied last year’s exams and took a shot at them. My dad is an adjunct prof at Columbia. He critiqued my stuff.”

Michael was beginning to get the picture. Ted was taking past exams in preparation for exams that he had not seen yet. It was a brilliant strategy. How much could the exams change over the years? The advantage that Ted would have on all of his classmates would be the priceless technique of knowing how to sit for a law school final examination, arguably the most important part of the law school process.

Most of his classmates would be entering the woods for the first time. Ted had already mapped the territory. He was light years ahead of his competition. Michael suddenly felt depressed.

“OK, you got me, master. When does school begin?”

“After we grab a few at the Desert Grille tonight.”

“A few what?” Michael asked.

“Oh Grasshopper, you are in greater need than I had imagined,” Ted said.

Michael looked at Ted’s happy-go-lucky face. It was hard not to like the guy. It was equally hard to tell him no.

Chapter 21

Kathryn hugged the ladies and thanked Lincoln for the ride. Jeremiah's car was in the driveway and she was excited to see him and give him the details of the trip to New York. She knew that he was still smarting with disappointment, so she resolved to cast as positive light as possible on Michael's move.

When she entered the house it was unusually dark and silent. There was no television playing or Jerry's voice booming over the telephone. Perhaps he'd turned in early. That didn't make a lot of sense. It was only six o'clock. She put her bags down and called his name.

"In here," replied Jeremiah from inside the den.

Kathryn walked in and flipped on the light. "Glad to see you sitting by the window, waiting for my return," she said.

Jeremiah laughed. She always knew how to make him laugh. She was his best friend in the world. "Hi honey. So tell me, do you think he'll ever return?"

"Jeremiah Knight you know more than anyone else that God is in control. This is a dream for Michael. I'm excited for him. One day he may be a lawyer for God."

Jeremiah walked over and gave her a bear hug. "That boy's a preacher, even if he or his momma don't know it yet."

"You know, for a preacher, you're not a bad lawyer."

"God forbid; I think He's got me on the right side of the pulpit."

"How are you feeling, Jerry?" Kathryn asked, with concern.

"I got some bad news yesterday."

Kathryn did not have to ask. Jeremiah's eyes told the story. That explained the somber mood. In their many years of marriage she had seen him tackle every issue there is to tackle in some shape or form. She didn't know a more courageous or a man stronger in faith. The news had to be cancer. The disease was a thief and it had temporarily robbed Jerry of his spirit.

"Oh Jerry," she said and took him by the hand. She led him to the sofa and placed his head to her breast, cradling the big man in her arms. He folded his arms around her and squeezed her tight.

Jeremiah was a tough man who believed deeply in the power of God to see him through this valley one more time. He was not one to feel sorry for himself and he was not one to give up on God. But it felt good to lay his head in his sweetheart's arms. She understood and knew him best. In her arms, he could simply be himself. Not some towering edifice of faith or something the congregation needed. He could admit that he was afraid.

Later that evening, or tomorrow, the Spirit of God would come and gently reassure and strengthen him. For this moment, he was back in high school, sitting just as they were now under apple trees and talking about the future. For a few moments, he would enjoy the comforts of his woman.

Kathryn cried and he did too, as they sat there silently renewing their love and commitment to each other.

###

Cindy ordered a pizza and turned on the news. She couldn't get the idea out of her head. What was Kristal really going to New York to see Mack about? It was awfully

convenient and cozy. Young wife left alone by negligent husband visits dashing New York attorney to go over the family business. Sure; over a bottle of wine and lobster.

Cindy sighed. She was certainly not ready to play in those leagues. She was having enough trouble trying to make one relationship work. Things had been good with Ramon in the past year or so. The job kept him away a lot but she couldn't argue with the fringe benefits.

Ramon was moving up like a rocket; new friends, a new car, and now a new house. It all sounded good, but somehow it felt empty. There was no one from her former life there to enjoy it with her. Her living arrangement with Ramon had estranged everyone, it seemed.

She had even lost touch with the people at the youth center. Now that she was perceived as having a little money, it seemed there was a wall between her and her counterparts. At her recommendation, Abby had taken the full-time position she'd abandoned.

Now it was all about Abby. Cindy felt stupid. "Oh, stop whining," she said to herself. She'd taken up with Ramon, knowing his background and the explosiveness of his temper.

She had grown up with a loving father and brothers. Why was she attracted to the wrong kind of men? "Only God knows," she thought. The truth was that Ramon was more appealing when he was needier. Now that he was becoming the big cheese at Great Neck, she felt like more of an appendage. She was also terrified of his anger. She kept imagining her head as the telephone he'd smacked to smithereens the other night.

I guess I can understand the guy she thought. She was not exactly on the best of terms with her parents. She wondered where Kristal would meet Mack tonight; perhaps at some fancy Manhattan restaurant or some penthouse somewhere. What a tramp. Cindy took hold of herself when she heard Ramon's key in the door.

"Hey, babe," she said without looking back.

"Hey," said Ramon and walked to the kitchen. "Listen, I have to fly out of here in the morning. I have some business in Jamaica."

"Again?" Cindy asked, trying not to look as annoyed as she felt.

"I'm sorry babe, but I have a big time deal that I have to cut."

"It always is."

"What?" asked Ramon as he walked over and turned off the television. "What is it with you this evening?"

"There's nothing *with* me. It's just that we are moving in a few days. I am handling all of the details and you may not even be here for us to move in. The last time you traveled you were gone for ten days."

"As you recalled, the fruit of my labors is what's buying us our new house in the Heights. After this deal, our new house may be the shortest lived in—"

"It's not always about money, Ramon. What are we going to do with the furniture I ordered today for our new house when your big deal comes through and *you* decide that we have to move again?"

"This is what we both wanted."

"I'm not a yo-yo." Cindy's blue eyes flashed anger. "Pretty soon you'll be like Sonny, flying all over the world while your wife . . ." Cindy stopped herself.

“What are you saying?”

Why, all of a sudden did Ramon look so ignorant, she asked herself, but managed only to sigh.

“Forget it,” she said. At least Kristal was a *wife*. This clod hadn’t even bothered to consider the possibility. Here they were moving into a new house in a week and the whole idea of marriage had never even been up for discussion. How much longer could she live with a Neanderthal? She got up and walked into bathroom, slamming the door behind her.

Ramon was in way over his head. As was his practice, this was where he emotionally checked out. The bottom line was that he had a job to do; a job that neither Sonny nor any of his superiors had the guts to do. He was called upon and he would answer the call. He would go to Montego Bay and he would ring Chin’s bell. He had come too far. *Semper fi*, baby.

Chapter 22

Michael's first class in law school was on the law of contracts. Just as Ramon Sanchez was boarding a small private plane, Michael took his seat in the middle of the large auditorium, about ten rows back. Ted, his roommate, was in his class, but was sleeping in this morning. Maybe it was sleeping off whatever he had tied-on the night before. Under Ted's theory of law school, classes were useless.

They were useless because class attendance wasn't graded and classes didn't teach law students how to pass law school exams; the only thing that showed up on your record and what potential employers cared about. One could accomplish far more during class time, like sleep, than sitting through a boring, for the most part, irrelevant lecture.

Michael could see the logic, to an extent, but his mind didn't work that way. He wanted the full scholastic experience. He wanted to challenge his mind and be challenged. He would write practice exams too, in preparation, but he wasn't jaded as to what his professors could teach. He was naturally excited and eager to learn.

Michael had thanked his friend for the invite to the nightclub last night, but nightclubs were not his thing. His dad had always been a practical preacher and teacher. "A man's got to stay out of fire son, if he don't want to get burned. It's just that simple."

Michael looked at the nervous students all around the room as the professor tinkered with some papers behind the podium. Jeremiah could probably teach some of these intellectuals a thing or two of country wisdom. "Straight from the Book of Proverbs," he would say. "Son, it's all right there."

Maybe it was the podium, but he missed his dad. Too bad he hadn't been able to see him off. He would fill him in on the details later. Michael settled back into his chair. After a few housekeeping items and introduction material, the lecture got underway.

Michael listened intently. The lecture would be conducted pursuant to the dreaded Socratic Method. The professor wouldn't simply lecture from prepared materials. He would, instead, call on students to answer questions emanating from the text. He'd read and prepared his notes from the night before, but he didn't want to be picked on. He slid a little lower in his chair.

The professor began. "Let us look at the case of Mercer vs. Dutch Ferry in your assigned reading. The first thing I would like to do is sort out the parties. Please tell me the plaintiff and the defendant in the lower court and the position of the parties upon appeal." He glanced at his seating chart and continued, "Mr. Knight."

Michael felt as if his heart began to gallop at a thousand paces per minute. His ears were hot and he felt a stutter coming on. "Compose yourself, boy," he said to himself. "This is smaller than most youth rallies you've preached. You read the case. Answer the question." Michael shuffled his notes.

"Ah, Mr. Knight, while we are all impressed by your organizational skills, I would think that your classmates would like a response sometime this hour. We have a lot of ground to cover."

Everyone laughed; everyone, except Michael. He was too flustered.

"I believe the plaintiff in the lower court was a New York corporation by the name of Dutch Ferry sir, and the defendant—"

"Oh, very good Mr. Knight. Glad you are with us."

More laughter.

“Geez Louise,” Michael thought. Ted was right.

###

David Knight sat in the office of the Morningside Community Church stunned. Kathryn had just given him the news. He knew Jeremiah wouldn't want to make a big deal out of this but he was shaken.

He'd been by Jeremiah's side daily the first time around and it was brutal. They were all preparing to lose him when God miraculously turned it around. Jeremiah was a living, breathing example of a miraculous healing and he'd preached about it often. The cancer had been in remission for so many years. What happened?

David felt lost. Who would feed his flock now? He felt like *he* needed a pastor. He went into the sanctuary and prayed. He would appeal to the Chief Shepherd. He knelt before the altar and whispered, “Oh Father in heaven, God of all comfort and mercy, I come to you today with a heart that is full. Lord, you see and know all things. Our lives and our times are in your hands. You see my dad and you know what is wrong with him. At one word you can heal him. Father, you've done it before. In the name of Jesus, do it again.”

With those words, David opened a torrent of tears. He couldn't verbally express anything else. He held on to the altar and spoke to his Father in heaven with a groaning that only the Spirit of God could interpret.

###

“Cindy, your father is ill . . . again,” Kathryn said.

Cindy paused, but knew precisely what Kathryn was talking about. She felt her voice cracking. “The cancer is back?” she asked.

“Yes, it looks like it is spreading very fast.”

Cindy took the telephone away from her ear for a second and then returned it there.

“Can I come and see him?”

“Oh Cindy, of course you can. Your father would love to see you.”

Cindy bawled. This sickness was so hard to understand. Her father had given his life to God. He had helped so many people. He was such a *good* man. *Why him?* She thought.

“Why don’t you come over for dinner tonight? David and Tara are also coming.”

“OK, what about Michael? Has anyone told him?”

“No; we all decided to wait for a little to see how the treatments go. You know how difficult it was for Michael to leave. He’s in his first semester, which is tough. This will be a distraction. He’ll just blame himself somehow.”

“You’re right. I’ll see you later Mom.”

“See you later honey, I love you.”

“I love you too, Mom,” Cindy managed and fell over into a puddle of tears. After what seemed like a long time she got up and looked at herself in the mirror. Blond hair, blunt cut, fancy clothes. She looked nothing like the rest of her family anymore.

After the argument with Ramon last night, she’d been doing some soul searching about the past as well as her future. Maybe she’d made some mistakes. Maybe she’d dishonored her father and mother. Maybe she needed to seek repentance and get out of this God-dishonoring relationship. What was she seeking to prove anyway?

Jeremiah's previous sickness had peeled the big man down like an onion. Frail and bedridden, he'd given up on trying to look strong for his little girl. She'd never seen him like that before and she'd hoped to never do so again. She felt like a prodigal child. It was time to go home. Her family would need her strength.

She was trying to act like a tough girl in the nasty, materialistic world. But the truth was that she wasn't cut out for it. Just like the Bible story, she would go to her father, throw herself on his mercy and ask for his forgiveness. She would make a fresh start.

###

It felt like déjà vu. Ramon was standing inside the same suite where he'd previously met Chin. Diego-Vega's people had given him the word that a final meeting was needed. No one had let on about Chin's recent encroachments and his breach of his previous agreement with Diego-Vega.

Chin had been testing the water for months to fully and finally run Diego-Vega out of Jamaica. He'd intended to send him a message the last time around, but a freak accident had clogged his shooter's gun and spared Ramon's life. Today would be different. He fully intended to send Diego-Vegas' representative home with a deal, but this time in a wooden box. He would take no chances with snipers on a roof. He would bring his artillery along with him. He was tired of Diego-Vega and his haughty attitude about his friends in New York and Hong Kong. He would rather die than give up any further territory in his own land.

Ramon looked at his watch. Diego-Vega's words rang in his ears. "He can't be reasoned with," he'd said.

Ramon poured a Captain Morgan straight up and downed it. “Nerves of steel,” he told himself. He heard the knock at the door. It was Chin. Show time.

###

Michael was wondering what to make for dinner when Ted showed up.

“There’s the man,” he said. “How was your first day dude?”

“Pretty scary,” Michael said. “Can you believe it, I was the first guy picked on. I’ll forever go down in history as the idiot who broke the ice for everyone. The entire day I was the butt of every joke for Professor Murray.”

“Sounds typical, hence why I opt for *Oprah*.”

“I’m not so sure that’s the answer either.”

“Have it anyway you want genius. In roughly 120 days, you, me and our wonderful classmates will sit down and take the same exams. You and I will trounce ninety-five percent of the people taking those exams and get our pick of the job opportunities. The only difference will be that you wasted your time being embarrassed by egotistical law professors and I got rich investing my trust fund online.”

Michael broke out into a howl. “You’re unbelievable Ted. I can see it now, you’ll be the pitchman for the ‘The Lazy Guy’s Guide to Graduating Law School.’ Soon you can branch out to other industries; ‘Lazy Guy’s Guide to Exercise. No need to go to the gym, just plug in some contraption to melt the fat’—”

“Call it what you want, but mark my words. I’ll be a Supreme Court Justice faster than you can say the word ‘contracts’.”

“That’s when I move to Australia.”

“Mark my words, Knight. Forget about dinner, my dad’s back in town. I told him all about you. He wants to meet you.”

“Really?”

Ted’s dad was among the New York legal elite. Michael had seen him appear on many news shows and the like. He couldn’t imagine that he wanted to meet him, regardless of what Ted said.

“Do I need to change?”

“Nah. I think we’re being joined by a couple of his law partners though. It would be good for you to get to know these guys.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah, dude. You can’t start this stuff early enough. Next summer you’ll have literally thousands of the brightest law students in the country descending on these guys like vultures looking for internships. Yale, Stanford, Harvard, Georgetown, name it. The list is endless.”

Michael nodded. He was learning again.

The lesson went on. “Most of these summer internships in the City pay a cool two thousand dollars per week or more. If you do a good job, you’re golden. You get a job offer that’s waiting on you when you graduate. Game over.”

“Wow,” Michael said. He was trying to calculate his potential summer income, but couldn’t get a thought in over Ted’s wheeling and dealing.

“Once the summer internship is locked, you pretty much retire until you graduate. I’m telling you. This law school thing is beautiful if you know how to play the game.

Tonight I'm going to introduce you to a couple of the partners in Dad's firm. Just shut up and let me do the talking."

"No problem."

"Good, let's go. I had my cabbie wait for us downstairs."

Michael grabbed his wallet and followed Ted. He'd only been in law school one day and he was off to his first interview. "Only in New York," thought Michael, as the two men hustled to the taxicab.

Chapter 23

Ramon opened the door and let Chin through. He didn't come alone this time. Standing with him were two tall, black Rastafarians with long dreadlocks that hung over their shoulder. Weapons cleverly concealed, the men were armed to bear.

Chin signaled and the two men fanned out throughout the suite while Ramon stood still and stared right at Chin. "He can't be reasoned with" echoed the voice of Raul Diego-Vega.

Chin crossed his hands in front of his belt buckle.

"You called this meeting Mr. Representative. What can a little man like me do for a big man like you?"

"Let's cut the small talk, Chin, you know why I'm here. Several months ago, right in this very room you and I cut a deal on behalf of our people. Our people have kept our end of the deal," Ramon said pointing at his own chest. "Your people have not," he finished.

"What makes you think that Paulus Chin has to listen to anything that *coward*, Raul Diego-Vega has to say?"

Ramon started to get hot. Who did this little punk think he is, talking about Mr. Diego-Vega that way? This conversation, he decided, was headed nowhere. Diego-Vega had been right. There was no reasoning with this Jamaican hoodlum. Ramon waived his hand in front of his face. The Rastafarians bristled. Ramon spoke.

"I think you better watch your mouth, little man," he said.

Chin laughed and clapped his hands. The Rastafarians began to laugh too. Chin was thoroughly amused. Here was this stupid newcomer kid who, but for God in heaven, if there was one, had just missed having his head blown off a few months ago, standing in

the room with three professional killers, spouting off. It was comical and Raul Diego-Vega was a coward for not dealing with the situation personally.

Ramon had been a marine hand-to-hand combat instructor. He knew the rules of engagement. If there was any time to strike it was now, while the men were feeling overconfident and sharing belly laughs.

Ramon saw the Rastafarian behind Chin reach for his weapon. Ramon sprung with the fierce agility of a cat knocking Chin back into the man. The black man banged his head hard against a faux stone column and fell, stunned, on top of Chin.

The other Rastafarian reached for his pistol, but too late. Ramon had already calculated his next move. He dropped to the ground and took him down. At the same time, the man's gun discharged, shooting the first Rastafarian who had wobbled to his feet.

"Two to go," thought Ramon. He sprung on top of the man who had just shot his colleague. The man pulled a knife and attempted to cock his arm back. Using a marine combat technique, Ramon diverted the man's knife into his own chest. "Two down, one to go."

Ramon tumbled forward, anticipating a blast from Chin at any time. He could hear his combat instructor, "protect the vital organs, boy." But it was too late.

Chin walked slowly over to Ramon. He growled, "Today I make a mistake friend, that I will nevah make again. My father teach me not to underestimate my enemy. Today I make that mistake mon, but nevah again."

Ramon managed to rise to his knees, breathing heavily, but Chin was standing over him with a loaded gun. Ramon squinted. He was prepared for anything. Chin pulled the

trigger. The gun did not discharge. Ramon rushed toward him and knocked him down. The gun fired.

Ramon felt the bullet enter his gut. He writhed in pain. He'd been hit, but he'd successfully taken the gun away from Chin. The little man was crawling on his hands and knees toward the door. He grabbed a loose pistol and turned to fire at Ramon.

"You can't reason with him," Ramon remembered. Chin placed his finger on the trigger. Ramon fired first and then blacked out.

Chapter 24

Cindy pulled the red BMW into her parents' driveway. She sat for a few minutes. She hadn't been around these parts for a while as the Ramon issue raged. She looked at the pleasant five-bedroom house. Her parents had never downsized. They didn't want to move out the memories they said.

She took a breath and knocked on the door. It was Jeremiah.

"Come on in, sweetheart," he said and they embraced.

If Jeremiah was taken aback by her new hairstyle, he did not let on. He'd already heard the rumor anyway. In person, Cindy's natural beauty shone. She would look good in any hairstyle.

Cindy threw her arms around her dad and they hugged for a while. She had a lot to say, but would wait until later. For now, she would just enjoy dinner and her family. She assumed David was on site somewhere. His van was parked outside. She hadn't seen her nephews for quite a while.

She walked in arm in arm with Jeremiah. "So how are you feeling, Dad?"

"You know how it goes hon. Some days are better than others. I've been feeling a bit over-tired recently. The doctor gave me something for temporary relief."

Cindy didn't know what to say. She was never good at these things. She knew that the last thing her dad wanted was for her to make a big deal, so she kept cool and joined Tara and Kathryn in the kitchen. David was in the back yard throwing a ball around with the boys.

Cindy went out back and caught up with David. He tried to talk to her about Elsie Sanchez, but she waived him off. She just wanted to be there for Jeremiah and not talk

about anything else. The two hugged. They hadn't seen each other in a while. Cindy promised to start visiting his church. David looked shocked, but excited.

Kathryn called for supper and the family sat down to eat. It was the best time they had spent in a long time. The only missing ingredient was Michael. Everyone wondered how he was doing.

###

Michael arrived at Justine's on the Upper East Side of Manhattan. The place was a small subterranean pub, accessible only from the curb through a set of winding steps that seemed to descend to nowhere. There was no sign or marquee to let anyone know that an establishment existed at that spot.

Ted's dad, Theodore "Teddy" Danforth III had been coming to this place for years. It was a quiet place off the beaten path, where power brokers could talk in peace without interruptions; where the famous and *infamous* held court. Tonight was Ted's first day of law school and Teddy wanted to celebrate in an appropriate spot. He could think of no better place than Justine's.

The boys arrived and rang the bell at the bottom of the stairs. The door buzzed open and they entered. Michael had never seen anything like it. Inside the place was like the gentlemen's clubs he'd read about. Everything was wood paneled. Important looking people were seated at each table discussing matters in hushed, but animated tones. The smell of cigars and whiskey was in the air. One man leaned over the biggest steak he'd ever seen. No one seemed to notice him or Ted, until they arrived at Teddy Danforth's favorite table.

He immediately stood to his feet and gave Ted a hug. He grabbed Michael's hand and shook it.

"I'm Ted's dad, Teddy Danforth. These are a couple of my partners I'm ashamed to admit."

A tall, distinguished man of about Teddy's age stood up. He was about Michael's height and build. The comparisons stopped there. His attire was impeccable as was every aspect of his presentation. He stretched out his hand.

"I'm J. Randolph Cutler," he said. Another man, shorter and a little ruffled said, "Hi there, I'm Dickey Simpson, can I buy you a beer?"

"No thanks," said Michael.

"How about an ale?"

"No, I'm fine, really."

"Come on kid, how about a stout?"

Cutler butted in. "My partner rarely gets no for an answer. He's the managing partner of our firm. Unfortunately, the power has made him less perceptive and that's a bit dangerous. This man obviously does not drink," he said, looking at Dickey Simpson who sat down.

Teddy broke in, "What's first day of school like boys?"

Michael waited for Ted to speak. He was silent.

Simpson chimed, "Hey fella, I understand you don't drink. Do you speak?"

This is going well so far, thought Michael. The two thousand per week paychecks were quickly going out the window where Ted had told him to throw everything else. Ted sure spoke a lot less around these guys.

“I guess I’m choked up because I was the first guy to get called on today in contracts class,” he said. For the first time Simpson looked engaged.

“What happened?” he asked.

“I froze on the spot. I was trying to figure out the plaintiffs and defendants in the lower court; appellees and appellants and venue.”

The lawyers around the table exploded in laughter. The look of confusion on Michael’s face was genuine. It was the classic law school story: new kid in class gets trounced by law professor; another victim of the Socratic Method.

“How about you Ted?” his father asked.

“I wasn’t as fortunate as Mr. Knight,” he said.

“Don’t worry,” Dickey said. “You’ll get your turn.”

Oprah Winfrey had better be asking the questions, Michael thought, but played along.

Cutler tinkered with his cufflinks and rose to leave. He paged his limousine driver and stuck his hands in his pockets. He looked directly at Michael.

“Son, you have something that’s rare in New York City, indeed in the world. You’ve got an honest face, a knack for story telling and a certain naiveté that *cannot* be faked. Juries will simply love you. If your grades are anywhere near the top five percent of your class at the end of this semester, please come and see me. We may have a place for you in our summer program, at whatever astronomical salary they’re paying you young bucks this year.”

Cutler stuck out his hand. Michael stood up and shook his hand heartily.

“I appreciate the offer, sir.”

Cutler slapped Michael on the back. “Get the grades, son. It’s not an offer yet.”

Chapter 25

Ramon blacked out holding his gut. The blast from his gun hit Chin hard and he fell over in pain. He had no doubt he'd soon be dead. He could feel life slipping away. He wondered if there was a God. If there was, he would be meeting Him soon. He would have to ask God about the luckiest man in the world. He would have to ask God about the punk who had sent him packing.

Exactly three seconds later Paulus Augusto Chin died and met God. But it was God who was asking all of the questions and he had run out of time and answers.

###

The men dragged Ramon's limp body into the biplane. Montego Bay police would not arrive for an hour. Chin's people would pound their chest but then settle. Diego-Vega had won after all. He'd defended his territory, perhaps at the cost of Ramon's life, but he was back in control.

The plane gathered speed and went airborne. Aboard, Ramon bled and dreamed of boyhood days, playing ball and winning championships. His life hung in the balance.

The pilot radioed ahead. A doctor was needed. Raul Diego-Vega received the news: Chin was eliminated and Sanchez was in bad shape. Standing in his home office, Diego-Vega smiled and sipped his brandy. "Victory!" he said.

###

The dinner party ended and David headed home. Cindy had been waiting for a chance to speak with Jeremiah. Kathryn busied herself about the kitchen while Cindy sat with him in the den.

“Daddy, I want to apologize to you and ask your forgiveness for the pain and embarrassment that I’ve caused you. The way I’ve been living is wrong and I’ve repented of it before God. Now, I just want to make it right somehow with you.”

Cindy trembled as she spoke. Her father was a good man, but she sincerely didn’t know what to expect. Jeremiah paused for a while and tried to keep his cool.

“Cindy, I love you. You’re my little girl. You’ll always be. That’s why this whole thing hurt so much.”

Tears rolled down their cheeks.

“But there’s one thing that I have to confess as well. I didn’t give you the unconditional love that you deserved while you were away from me. I conditioned my love *for* you based on certain behavior that I wanted *from* you. That was wrong Cindy. Would you please forgive me?”

Cindy cried harder and hugged her father tight. That was the most honest thing she’d ever heard anyone say. She now knew why she respected him so much. She couldn’t explain why her current choice in a man fell so far away from the mark.

“Of course I forgive you Dad. Isn’t that the message of the Cross?”

Jeremiah looked into Cindy’s eyes. His daughter was truly growing up. Some of his teachings had stuck. He embraced her again.

“Yes, honey, that’s *the* message.”

###

Back at his apartment, Michael kicked his feet up on the couch. Ted had decided to spend the night at his dad’s place.

“Just get the grades,” Cutler had said. He could do that. He’d been doing that his whole life. Ted may have some harebrained theories, but there was a little wisdom behind a lot of things that he said. If he worked hard in class and practiced hard on exams, he would ace his courses, he was convinced. He would get a great job with a top firm right out of the box.

Ted had said that Cutler was one of the name partners in Cutler, Sloan & Burke, one of the oldest and most prestigious law firms in the world. Headquartered in New York, the firm had offices in twenty major cities in the world. With over fifteen hundred attorneys practicing in every legal discipline known to man, an internship at Cutler was the prize catch for all top law students.

Ted was right again. What was the chance of him ever meeting a guy like Cutler? What was the chance of him inviting a nobody like Michael to call on him for a job? There was something to that saying about who you know, after all. Michael turned out the light. Things were shaping up nicely in New York.

###

Cindy drove back to her apartment feeling on air. God had reconciled her relationship with her parents. God had healed her dad before. He would do it again. She just needed to clean up her act and get in the game. She needed to be a part of a church and she needed to start interceding for her dad.

In high school she was on her youth intercessory prayer team and she always loved those times of prayer. She used to pray with Kathryn too. All that had blown away, but now a new wind was blowing. A new day had come.

###

Ramon opened his eyes in the makeshift island hospital. His entire midsection felt as if it was on fire, but he was glad to be alive. He didn't remember everything that had happened, but if he was alive, it meant he'd been successful. One of Diego-Vega's people saw him stir.

"Welcome back to the real world, compadre. You've been out for two days. Our physicians took care of you but you will need some time to heal. That was some nice work back there. The old man is pleased."

Ramon attempted a smile and winced.

"Don't do it, compadre. There will be plenty of time for laughing when you're back in the United States. Mr. Diego-Vega is sending one of his jets. You'll be home in no time."

Ramon closed his eyes. He attempted to think clearly. Chin's elimination was huge. Diego-Vega owed him big time. This would open up a new chapter in his life. He winced again at the pain. He was glad that he could actually feel pain. He'd made it to the big time.

Ramon thanked his lucky stars that day. He didn't yet know enough to thank the God who, in His sole discretion, had permitted him to take another breath.

###

Elsie Sanchez knew. She'd just arisen from her knees where she'd been begging God to allow her one more chance to make it up to the son who rightfully hated her. "Oh, God, one more chance," she pleaded through the tears. "Oh, God, one more chance. You are the God of all mercy; give me one more chance," she begged.

And the Lord in his unsearchable wisdom and mercy granted her request.

Chapter 26

Two days later, Raul Diego-Vega's private jet touched down in Kansas City. Aboard the plane was a sore but triumphant Ramon Sanchez. Diego-Vega had to admire him. He had gone into the belly of the beast and came out alive. The organization needed more bold leadership like this.

Diego-Vega sent his private car to retrieve Ramon. He was standing in his study when his driver radioed that the car had arrived at his mansion. He went downstairs and met Ramon in his grand foyer. He held out his hands and gently squeezed Ramon's shoulders.

"You have made this organization proud. Come in. We have much to talk about."

Ramon walked slowly behind Diego-Vega. Chin had called him a coward. What did he mean by that? It was water under the bridge now anyway. Ramon followed him into his office and took a seat.

"My partners are very excited by these developments," he said. "Your efforts are worthy of great reward." He handed Ramon a card with several numbers written on it. Those are access codes to a new bank account that I have taken the liberty to establish for you." Ramon was intrigued.

"When you're feeling better, we'll go down and see my banker. For now all you need to know is this," He paused for effect. "I have wired one million dollars into that account with your name on it. Welcome to the big time, Mr. Sanchez."

Ramon sat still and stared at Diego-Vega. He was speechless.

###

Cindy had packed up the apartment, but not to move in with Ramon. In his typical fashion he'd been away for three days, but had only bothered to call once. Because she had ignored his call, he hadn't called back. She was tired of the childish behavior and was ready to grow up in life.

She had asked Kathryn if she could bunk at home for a while until she figured herself out. Both Kathryn and Jeremiah said she was more than welcome to stay as long as she wished. She was cleaning out a closet when Ramon hobbled through the door. A man from the Diego-Vega organization carried his luggage up the stairs.

Noticing his strained movements, Cindy approached him. "What happened?" she asked. Ramon dismissed the man and lifted up his shirt.

"I got mugged in Jamaica. Can you believe it? I fly all the way to Jamaica to get mugged."

"Oh my God," said Cindy, "How badly are you hurt?"

"I refused to give up my wallet and was shot."

Cindy inhaled. "And you didn't call me?"

"I didn't want to worry you. It's mostly a flesh wound. The bullet went in one place and came out the other. I got treatment for it in Jamaica."

Cindy sat down in a chair. She felt terrible. She'd been literally moving out on the guy and he was terribly injured. Her attitude softened a little.

She walked over and took his arm over her shoulder. She walked him to the living room couch and helped him to get comfortable. She didn't want to be insensitive, but she wanted to level with him.

“Ramon, while you were away this time, it gave me some time to think . . . about us.”

“Me too,” he said.

Cindy paused. That was strange. Ramon had never said that he was thinking about their relationship. She always had to beat any information that she really needed out of him. Maybe the injury had made him think.

“I’ve been thinking that this live-in relationship is not right—”

“Me too. I think we need to put a stop to it,” he said between winces.

Cindy was taken aback. Wait a minute here. I’m doing the dumping. What does he mean he wants to put a stop to our relationship? Cindy looked at Ramon. He was obviously in a lot of pain. She said, “What do you mean?”

Ramon hoisted himself up on one elbow and stroked her cheek.

“I mean that I would like to marry you Cindy. I mean that what you are saying is right. Will you marry me?”

Cindy was flabbergasted. Her face showed it. Ramon was surprised by her utter shock at his statements. Had he been that bad? Probably. Raul Diego-Vega had once again saved the day. Cindy was getting ready to terminate their live-in relationship. His proposal couldn’t have come a moment sooner.

A full minute later, Cindy hadn’t answered Ramon and was staring at him. He placed the palm of his hand on her face. “Cindy I love you. Mr Diego-Vega has promised me that the crazy trips will soon end. My take from this last mission will enable us to put down some roots, maybe start a family . . .”

Cindy stood up. She hadn't been ready for this. When Ramon left he'd been all about money and getting ahead in the company. Now he was Ward Cleaver, for heaven's sake. She needed time to think.

“Ramon I can't answer you right now.”

###

Raul Diego-Vega sat aboard his jet. It was one thing having certain territorial agreements, but the outright elimination of Chin had opened up many new possibilities in the islands. He would have to consult with his partners, but first he had to meet with the lawyers.

Mack Stone would meet him in Manhattan to go over pending legal affairs and his proposed acquisition activities in the islands. He would then meet with the financing people for a day to oversee the financial operations.

Finally, before heading to South America, he would meet with his outside legal advisor. For many years, this man and his partners had steered the Great Neck Shipping Company through smooth sailing and rough waters.

He'd fought off every civil or criminal threat to the Diego-Vega empire. Even for a New York lawyer, he was super expensive, but his ability and influence could not be valued. He was well-worth his eight hundred and fifty dollars per hour price tag.

Diego-Vega was looking forward to seeing his old friend and advisor, J. Randolph Cutler.

###

Cindy allowed Ramon to drift off to sleep. Two hours ago she was ready to move out and start her life over. Now, Ramon had proposed marriage. Was he dazed? Did the Jamaican hospital give him hallucinogenic drugs? She was not sure what to do.

If Ramon was for real and not just having some kind of brain burp, then wasn't this exactly what she'd been looking for? He was promising to marry her, settle down and start a family. That is what she was feeling. She hadn't said a word to him. He'd come up with this on his own.

If she held his past against him and didn't give him a chance, was that not the same lack of forgiveness that she'd discussed with her dad? Ramon was a person like everyone else, with mistakes and a lot of growing to do. But if he were serious about taking this step, then she would take it too. She'd been with Ramon since high school. If he were willing to go in a new direction, it would be foolish to throw away all of that history.

While Ramon slept, Cindy decided that she would marry him, but it would be under three strict conditions. First, she would still move out until the time of their marriage. Second, Ramon would attempt reconciliation with his mother, and third, he would go through marriage counseling with her father.

If he would meet those three conditions then he had to be really serious about getting married.

Chapter 27

Two days later Michael got the call from Kathryn. “Cindy and Ramon are getting married. They want to do it very quickly and so they’ve planned it for the Thanksgiving break.”

“Wow,” was all that he could say. That had come from left field. Ramon didn’t seem like the marrying kind. He’d always assumed that one day Cindy would become bored with Ramon and move on with her life.

The reports from Abby, David and others were that Ramon had turned his life around and was continuing to prosper. No one could argue with that.

For years the argument had been that Ramon was a good-for-nothing-shack-up artist. It would seem highly hypocritical to blame the guy for finally doing right by Cindy and settling down in a career.

If Cindy was happy, then he was happy. He would show up and be supportive. He wondered where his dad stood on all of this.

###

Cindy and Ramon sat around the small coffee table in Jeremiah’s office. They’d begun the marriage counseling class and Jeremiah was pleased to see that Ramon had accepted Cindy’s terms for obtaining her hand in marriage. First and foremost, Jeremiah wanted to nail down Ramon’s spiritual status.

“Ramon, what is your thought about what happens to a man’s soul when he dies?”

“I don’t know,” he said.

“Does the man’s soul go to hell or heaven?”

“I don’t know which one. Frankly I don’t believe there is a hell or heaven. Man makes either hell or heaven here on earth. If there were such a thing, then I would say bad people go to hell and the good people go to heaven. It’s that simple.”

“What about you?” Jeremiah asked. “Where are you going when you die?”

Ramon did not hesitate. “Forgive my language, but straight to hell, sir.” Cindy flinched.

“Why do you say that?”

“Because I am not a good person, sir, and I’ve done a lot of bad things. There is no space for me in heaven.”

“What if I told you that you were wrong, that God has promised a space for you in His kingdom in His presence for eternity?”

Ramon looked at Cindy as if to say, “You asked for this,” and looked back at the preacher. “May I speak frankly sir?”

“Yes of course,” said Jeremiah.

“I don’t believe a word of it.”

Cindy looked at Jeremiah. Ramon was just being honest, but this would be a problem. The Bible taught that Christians should not, if it can be prevented, marry non-believers. As a pastor’s daughter she had seen some of the difficulty this caused in marriage. Ramon needed a better answer if he was going to marry the preacher’s daughter.

Jeremiah persisted. “Ramon, you just told me that you’re not a good person . . . that you’ve done many bad things, isn’t that right?”

“Yes sir.”

“That’s a great place to start, son.” Jeremiah was smiling.

Ramon looked confused. He looked at Cindy for support. She was looking at the preacher.

Jeremiah continued. “I’d like you to turn with me in your Bible to the book of Romans, chapter 3 and verse 23. What does it say there Ramon?” Cindy helped him to fumble his way through the pages.

“It says, ‘For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God’—”

“That’s right son, *all* have sinned against God. That means me, you, Cindy; all humanity has fallen short of God’s righteous standards. No one gets a pass.”

Ramon was stunned. He’d never heard anything like this. The marine Chaplain had attempted to talk to him on a few occasions, but he’d always blown the man off. He never had time for religion; he felt it was for weak people. Funny, he thought, Cindy supposedly knows all of this stuff, but has never tried to share any of it with me. The preacher had begun to get his attention.

“God is perfect Ramon and sinless. Because all have sinned, our sins separate us from God. Thus, if we die in this sinful condition, we will be eternally separated from God.”

Ramon thought of how close he had just come to dying . . . with the blood of three men on his hands. Yes, he would be separated from God, if there was one. He was sure that his soul was headed for an abyss. The preacher was talking again.

“Because our sins separate us from God, the greatest need in any man’s life is to reestablish the connection with God. Once you learn how to make peace with God and

then do so, you will be able to live this life with a sense of deep meaning and you will know for sure that you will have a place in His presence when you die.”

Ramon was not so sure that he needed any other meaning in life. He was doing exactly what he wanted to do now, stacking up dough fast. He did have his doubts, however, about the afterlife. Forever was a long time. He listened.

“I want you to turn over to chapter 5 and verse 8. Please read that section for me.”

Ramon continued to read. “But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” Ramon paused. What did that mean?

“While we were sinners, Christ died for us.” He could not get past those words.

Why would someone die for a filthy person like me? He thought.

Jeremiah read the puzzled look on his face. “You see Ramon, the Bible teaches that all men sin against God and are separated from God because of it. But that fact alone does not prevent God from still loving mankind.” Ramon could not understand why not, but listened.

“That means that despite your sins and mine, God still loves us and wants to end the separation. He wants to have a relationship with us.”

Ramon looked down at the ground. His wheels were turning in several directions. The preacher was showing him stuff that no one had ever told him was in the Bible. He couldn’t sort it out fast enough, but he wanted to hear more.

“As human beings, we can’t quite understand that kind of love. We tend to hate those who hate us and take revenge against those who trespass against us.”

Ramon nodded. He understood that part. He hated his father; the coward, and he hated his mother; the drunk. He would like to wipe their memory from the face of the earth.

Jeremiah leaned in. “God is not like that son. He loves us in spite of our wickedness.”

Ramon looked at the clock then at the preacher. “Well, I thank you for your time sir. I thank you for teaching me these things—”

“Don’t worry about the clock son, there’s more.” Jeremiah went on; “Go ahead and turn over to chapter 6 and verse 23. What does it say there?”

Ramon read on, and began to feel uncomfortable. “For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Now they were finally onto something that Ramon had heard before; the wages of sin is death! Stationed overseas a few years ago, there was a street preacher who used to use that line a lot- the wages of sin is death, the wages of sin is death. He wanted to tell the guy to shut up. Everyone knew *that*.

Jeremiah said, “You see son, although God loves us, despite our sins, the Lord is a God of justice. That means that all sin must be punished.”

“I can relate,” Ramon said. And he could. As a soldier, Ramon understood very clearly lines of authority, crime and punishment. Yes, he had crossed that line many times. But it was always with the knowledge of the potential consequences. He was struggling more with the love part of the equation. Crime and punishment he understood.

Jeremiah said, “So God was left with a dilemma of sorts. On-the-one-hand, God loves mankind, and despite our sins, He desires to end the separation and enter into a

relationship with us. On-the-other-hand, God is a God of justice and must punish all sin. How would God resolve this dilemma?” Jeremiah asked.

Ramon was wondering the same thing. If all people sinned and God had to punish all sin, then no one could have the so-called relationship with God that the preacher was talking about. He listened keenly.

“The answer is right there in the Scripture Ramon. Let’s look again.”

“OK,” said Ramon wondering what he had missed.

“Remember Romans chapter 5 and verse 8? It says that while we were sinners, *Christ died for us*. And Romans chapter 6 and verse 23 teaches that the wages of sin is death, but *the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.*”

Oh yeah, Ramon said to himself. He wanted to hear more about that part. He had always been confused about the whole Jesus thing. It seemed that people were always pushing Him as some kind of guru or something. Some said He was God. Some said He was a good man. Up until this moment, Ramon didn’t care.

Jeremiah went on. “In Jesus Christ, God solved our dilemma. God knew that on our own, you or I could never lead a sinless life and work our way to heaven.” You got that right, Ramon thought.

“He knew that all men sinned and that all sin must be punished.” Ramon nodded.

“So in His infinite grace and mercy: God took on flesh in the Person of Jesus Christ, came to this earth in a small town called Bethlehem two thousand years ago, lived the sinless life that you and I could never live, then hung on a cross in payment of the sin debt that you and I could never pay. Then he rose from the dead demonstrating for all the world to see that he had conquered over sin and death.”

The room was deathly silent.

“In other words, Ramon, on the Cross, God poured out on Jesus all His wrath for all the sins of all humanity, once and for all eternity.”

Ramon tried to process the information.

“You see Ramon, for all the wrong we’ve done, that should have been you and me hanging on that cross; that would have been justice.” Ramon agreed.

“But while we were yet sinners—”

“Christ died for us,” the young man finished the sentence.

“That’s right son,” Jeremiah said. “And He rose again and is alive today beckoning you to come to Him.”

Ramon sat back in his chair and exhaled. He thought of the people he had shut out and hurt over the years. Elsie, Cindy, Paulus Chin. . . . He was a cold-blooded murderer. He didn’t deserve love like that.

“I’m sorry sir, but I’m not worthy—”

“That’s exactly right. No one is. That is why the Bible calls it the *gift* of God. And God is making that gift available to you right now, Ramon. All you have to do is take it.”

Tears welled-up in the young man’s eyes. “I don’t know *how*,” he said softly.

“Let’s go a little further,” Jeremiah said. “Turn over to chapter 10, verses 9 through 10; let’s pick it up right there.”

Chapter 28

Mack Stone looked out of the large plate glass window of his penthouse apartment in Manhattan. The view overlooking Central Park was breathtaking. He slapped on one of his three hundred dollar ties and tossed his hair with his hands. He had to meet with Diego-Vega and J. Randolph “Jack” Cutler this afternoon.

He couldn't stand the sight of Jack Cutler. He could never understand why Diego-Vega felt the need to bring him in and pay astronomical fees for work that *he* had already overseen and approved. Just like the emperor's new clothes, the pompous jerk always found something to poke a hole in. It didn't matter how inane or inconsequential. As long as he made himself look good in front of Diego-Vega and the executives, he was glad to dump on Stone's work or advise them against his recommendations.

Every time he so much as winked over a proposal or matter, they received a bill for a hundred grand. Not that he cared about the money; there was enough of that to burn. It was just the audacity of Cutler to think that his advice was actually *worth* that.

In his arrogance, he'd all but suggested that the old man fire him on the spot recently. Stone's cheeks flushed hot as he thought about it. In an open meeting with Great Neck's top executives, Cutler carped that if Stone continued to overlook the international tax ramifications of the company's legal maneuverings, it would cost the organization millions one day. The implication? Drop Stone and spend more fees on Cutler.

Stone knew that Diego-Vega was a lot of things, but a fool was not one of them. He was well aware that there was no “international tax ramifications” on the deals and that the majority of Cutler's advice was simply puffing up his legal bill, but Diego-Vega

didn't care. Jack Cutler had something else of great value to the Board of Directors: worldwide connections at the highest levels. That information was priceless.

So for now he would play the second fiddle game and tolerate Cutler. At least the money was right. But soon he would have the last laugh. Soon he would put Cutler in his place, cash out and disappear where even Diego-Vega couldn't find him. It would be Mack Stone who would fire the Great Neck Shipping Company, not the other way around. The thought put a smile back on his face.

But first he had to wrap up the leftover business in the Caribbean caused by the demise of Paulus Chin. The old man had managed to make a hit man out of the young fool Ramon Sanchez. Diego-Vega would ride that pony until the end. Sanchez would never get out of the spiral. Diego-Vega had photos and mounds of evidence of the Chin killings.

Any thought of leaving the company or failure to accept the next *assignment* would result in an anonymous telephone call to the local authorities and a forced extradition. The Jamaican authorities would hang the boy high. That would suit him fine. He'd heard that he was supposed to be marrying the knockout blonde with the piercing blue eyes. There was something *different* about that girl. She wasn't in it for the money like the rest of the bloodsuckers. She probably really loved Diego-Vega's new assassin.

Stone chuckled. Some slime balls have all the luck. Good things come to those who wait he surmised and stuffed some papers into his briefcase. He called his driver and had his car brought to the front of his building. He walked toward the elevator that opened exclusively to his apartment. Already pushing it on time, he sighed and went back toward

his desk and scribbled a note. He tiptoed to his master bathroom and pasted the note on the mirror.

The note read: “I anticipate taking home a lot of work from my meeting with clients today. I would appreciate it if you would not be here when I return.”

Thirty minutes later Kristal Alvarado crumpled the note and packed her things. She had gotten everything she needed to know.

###

Cindy was remembering her days on the youth evangelism team. They always witnessed about the Gospel in teams of two. One person did the talking while one person prayed for the Holy Spirit to open the heart of the listener to receive Jesus.

Cindy was praying hard for Ramon in the silence of her heart. Only God could make a breakthrough here. She also asked the Lord for forgiveness. For years she’d been with Ramon and had never loved him enough to take the time to explain the Gospel. She’d been so far from God for so long that she’d forgotten how or more importantly, *why*.

The other day she’d repented and put the past behind her. She wouldn’t look back and lament. The thing to do right now was pray.

“Are you at Romans 10, son?”

“Yes sir,” Ramon replied.

“What do verses 9 and 10 say?”

“It says ‘that if you confess with your mouth, “Jesus is Lord,” and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved.’”

“Uh huh. Skip down to verse 13 and read that too.”

Ramon continued. “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”

“There it is in black and white. If you will confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord, that he conquered sin and death on *your* behalf, and if you will *believe* in your heart that He did, then you will be saved. He will forgive you of your sins and clear away the wall that separates you from God.” Ramon bit down hard.

“Look at verse 13 Ramon. Who does it say that this gift is available to?”

Ramon read the verse for the second time. “Everyone,” he said, and then broke down in tears.

###

“Those who hope in the Lord shall never be disappointed,” said David Knight quoting the book of Isaiah. He’d been thinking about Jeremiah as he said the words. His mid-week Bible study was in full session. Today he was teaching about hope.

In the other room his prayer warriors called on the name of the Lord. They claimed their spouses and sons and daughters from alcohol, drugs and from the valley of the shadow of death. They called out for Jeremiah, for David and his family. They did as God’s people had done since the fourth chapter of Genesis.

Elsie Sanchez called out too. God had given her Morningside Church and a heart to kick the alcoholism that had nearly destroyed her life. She called on the name of Lord, claiming her son for His righteous kingdom and purposes.

###

And in his Manhattan apartment, Michael prayed that the Lord would give him wisdom and guidance to do well on his exams. Cutler’s firm was an opportunity of a

lifetime and it was as good as in his hands. He prayed that God would grant him wisdom and the ability to excel at crunch time.

###

A little further uptown, Cutler was having a prayer of his own, of sorts. He was praying that the meeting with “Pretty Boy Stone” would end so that he could head to his racquetball match.

Some constituents from the Royal Family of England were in town and he had to be at the United Nations for a 7:00 p.m. reception. He wished Stone would just shut up, quit justifying himself and accept his changes to his usual oversights.

Diego-Vega was also boring him, but the money never did. It took a lot of *revisions* to support a five million dollar per year lifestyle.

###

In the rented limousine heading for Richmond Heights, Kristal Alvarado was praying that Sonny had taken her advice. They didn’t have to lay down for his eternal banishment to some jungle in South America.

Sonny knew some people in the islands who had put him in touch with Frankie Chin, Paulus Chin’s hot-tempered younger brother. With the information she’d lifted from Stone, Frankie could hit Diego-Vega hard and then help them disappear.

What did she have to lose? Sonny would never get out of South America alive. Kristal opened the door of their home and threw her bags down. She began to climb the steps when she noticed something out of the corner of her eye. It was a man seated in her living room. He seemed to be quietly sipping iced tea.

###

Ramon threw his hands over his face. Oh yes, he needed forgiveness. He replayed the scene over and over in his mind. The vicious attack on the Rastafarians, Chin crawling away . . .

“Father forgive me, for I have sinned. I don’t deserve it but I ask that you set me free. I believe in my heart that only you can make me free.”

Cindy and Jeremiah encircled the sobbing young man. Had anyone really taken any time to know him? This would be a new start for everyone.

Ramon wept for the wrongs he had done. He wept for the father who had deserted him. He wept for his mother and for all of the lost years. He wept for the illegal business that he knew his company dealt in. He cried until it was all out, until he could cry no more.

###

Kristal turned to face the man. It was Javier Sosa, one of Diego-Vega’s generals. Her heart pounded and her knees became weak. The man placed the glass of tea on the center table and stood to his feet.

“Stupid girl. Didn’t you know that Mack Stone’s apartment is company property?”

Kristal let out an audible gasp.

“Shut up!” he snapped. If you keep quiet, you just may live.”

###

Ramon stood up, encircled by Cindy and Jeremiah. Maybe he’d found a family after all. He felt like a new man, but a little confused.

“Where do I go from here?” he asked.

“One day at a time,” said Jeremiah. “Cindy will get you some introductory materials that will help you. Read over those materials and I’ll see you both for your next session in a couple of days.

Ramon and Cindy embraced. They were both crying. Cindy embraced Jeremiah and Ramon shook his hand. They exited the church and walked into what felt like a whole new life.

All around the world people were praying. The power brokers were meeting and the powerless were begging. People were being married and given in marriage. Some were being born and some were dying. The world kept turning and God was on His throne.

Chapter 29

Michael's first semester in law school had ripped away with lightning speed. He felt confident in his performance and was looking forward to the holidays at home. This year would be special. Cindy had planned a winter wedding. Who gets married one week before Christmas? That was Cindy. She always had to be different.

Michael was relieved with the healing that had taken place in the family. Dad had led Ramon to the Lord, and he was now attending David's church regularly and otherwise fitting in.

Abby had been completely supportive of his efforts. Maybe it was the six figure starting salary that Debbie had been so impressed with. He had to tell himself to take it easy every time he thought about figures like that. First of all, his aspirations were not about money and second, the Ted Danforth theory was still in play.

Only the top five percent got the cream jobs. Period. Even the aloof Jack Cutler had emphasized his need to score great grades. No top of the class credentials, no need to apply. Michael switched his thoughts to something more pleasant. He felt good about his examination performance, but not *that* good.

He couldn't wait to see Abby. He'd missed her more than he thought he would. After the initial thrill of the experience wore off and he'd buckled down to work, he sure would have loved to see her face from time-to-time.

Maybe it was his imagination, but Todd seemed to be showing up more and more around Abby. Todd's giving me a ride here. Todd's giving me a ride there. Todd lent his truck to my dad . . .

Michael shrugged it off. He was being silly. Todd had been his best friend for years. He was rich, good looking and smart. He was one of the most eligible young men in the area. Still, Michael knew that it was lonely in that small town and he could hear his friend's voice saying one too many times for comfort, "Don't worry, I'll take care of Abby for you."

The last time Michael checked, Abby had a wonderful supportive family. What did she need Todd to *take care* of her for? Michael caught hold of himself.

"Pleasant thoughts," he said. Abby was a good girl and they had vowed to remain chaste until marriage. With three years of law school looming in front of them, that was shaping up to be a feat.

For the past few weeks he'd been toying with an idea. If he was able to secure an internship at Cutler's firm, his summer earnings plus whatever job Abby could get would support them. He could probably work part-time during the year for the firm or somewhere else to help make up the funds. After graduation Abby would quit. They would pull together a small wedding at First Baptist, keep costs down and survive in the City until he was gainfully employed.

Ted was a great guy but they were from two different worlds. They hardly ever saw each other, like two ships in the night. He was forever grateful to Ted though. He had made the Jack Cutler connection.

He had the law school shtick down. He was ready for his woman.

###

Across the runway, not far from where Michael's jet was landing, Mack Stone sat aboard the company's private jet. He'd eaten some humble pie with the Kristal Alvarado

fiasco. He was lucky. He'd held their conversations to generalities that sounded juicy and he'd only left meaningless loose documents around the penthouse. Anyone dumb enough to try to do anything with that kind of information deserved what they got.

Still, the whole matter was an embarrassment. Another bit of alleged carelessness on his part. What did he have to do with Kristal and Sonny's plot to get revenge on Diego-Vega for Sonny's demotion? He gave the woman nothing. In fact, because of their liaison, she was caught. Now, supposedly they were both missing. He heard something the other day about a hiking accident in Central America. Poor slobs. Good idea, bad timing.

Because of his supposed *mistake in judgment*, Cutler, of course, had to be consulted. He could hear the jackal selling him out to the old man.

Nevertheless, he smirked confidently, knowing that his day was coming.

###

David and Abby greeted Michael at the airport. They all hadn't anticipated missing each other as deeply as they did. Abby looked terrific. Michael lifted her off her feet as if walking her across a threshold. David stood aside allowing them to enjoy the moment.

He wanted to tell her his plans, but he wanted to be careful. He needed to talk to Jeremiah about it. Abby and David filled him in on all of the latest Ozark Falls gossip. They talked about Ramon and Cindy and the upcoming wedding. No one said anything about Jeremiah's illness.

Michael filled them in on the rigors of law school and his newfound aspirations. He left out the part about the salary because he didn't want to embarrass David. When they arrived at the house, Michael jumped out of the car and embraced Kathryn at the door.

The moment he laid eyes on Jeremiah, he knew that something was terribly wrong.

###

Ramon seemed to be growing slowly, but surely, in the ways of the Lord. He was a faithful church attendee and had even been going with Cindy to Sunday School classes. Right after his profession of faith in Jeremiah's office, he'd resolved to make peace with Elsie. If God could forgive him for his heinous sins, then he could also forgive, or at least try.

The first get together was at David's church. It was awkward. Ramon stood up while his mother sat down in the front row.

"Ramon, I don't expect you love me," she said.

That's right, is all that came to his mind.

"In fact, Ramon, I understand why you would hate me." He said nothing.

"I'm not here to try and make any excuses. We're both too old for that. I've been trying to figure it out for myself and I can't seem to come up with any satisfactory answers. The only thing that I can say is when Pedro took his life . . ."

Ramon's gut involuntarily wrenched. He hadn't heard his father's name pronounced in years.

"It felt as if someone had taken my life too." Ramon fought hard to hold back his emotions.

"I couldn't understand it. He seemed like a happy man. We were a happy family—"

Ramon threw his hands up. All of this was still too new to him. The wound dealt to his heart by Pedro Sanchez was still raw. He wanted to bolt out of the room. As his gut

tensed to go, however, he felt the other wound. The one dealt him by Paulus Chin. That wound stopped him in his tracks.

He looked at Elsie. He'd judged her his entire adult life. She had neglected and abused him and herself. But she hadn't put the gun to Pedro's head. She wasn't guilty of killing anyone. He was.

For the first time in years he saw his mother beneath the layers of alcohol abuse and beneath the layers of his own hate. She was human, just as he was. "All have sinned," the Bible said. He sat down beside her and placed his head in his hands. He remembered his mama who made the birthday parties and came to his game; the mama who had been his biggest fan. He remembered the mama she was; before Pedro Sanchez pulled a fast one on both of them.

Ramon bowed his head in his mama's lap and wept. "I forgive you, Mama," he said, and meant it. "It was not your fault . . . it was not your fault."

###

Michael embraced Jeremiah. The big man was obviously shaky. Everyone knew the very moment Michael knew, but they shuffled bags and made much about Michael and New York City.

Michael's mind was racing. Dad's illness must be back, but when did this all occur? No one had said a thing to him. He wanted to ask Kathryn, but bit his tongue. There would be time for questions later.

###

Cindy and Ramon's wedding was beautiful. Michael and David walked her down the aisle and Jeremiah performed the ceremony. Cindy had come home after all. The day was a testament to the power of prayer and the truth of the Scripture. "Train up a child in the way he should go and when he is old he will not depart from it."

Elsie had also seen the power of God at work. God had cleaned up her life and reconciled her with her son. Nothing was impossible.

Raul Diego-Vega was also present. He supplied the couple with lavish gifts. Ramon was increasingly uncomfortable with his job. Things had quieted down since his last run to Jamaica. He hadn't been called upon for any special assignments. He'd hidden behind the day in day out administrative details of a busy logistics business. He tried to tell himself that the vast majority of his work was legitimate. He was about to get a wife, and soon children, no doubt. There was no way he could make the kind of money he'd become used to in any other industry.

There was the million dollars in the offshore account. But there was no way that Diego-Vega would allow him to keep that if he tried to leave the company. That was another matter. Even if he wanted to, how would he go about leaving the company?

Diego Vega wouldn't allow it, he was sure. In a twisted way, he owed the man. It was he who told Ramon to marry Cindy. That chain of events had led to him meeting God and reconciling with his mother.

Diego-Vega had been used to lead him to the Lord; funny how God works at times. Ramon was afraid to talk to Jeremiah or David, his pastor. He would have to figure this one out on his own.

Those were the troubled thoughts of Ramon Sanchez on his wedding day.

###

Later at the reception Abby was a bit distant. Michael could read the signs. She had the look that every young woman in her position had at weddings. Michael thought about his plans. He hadn't yet discussed them with Jeremiah. They hadn't had a chance to sit and talk since the day he hit town.

Abby just seemed so *distant* that he needed special action. What did he need to discuss anyway? It was either he tell her his plans now or wait until he was back in the City. Cutler internship or not, he would make the move. Everyone in town had waited on them for years. There was nothing to think about.

He waited for a romantic slow dance and held her as closely as possible. "Did I tell you how beautiful you look tonight, babe?"

Abby looked into his eyes. "You're not so bad yourself, champ." For the first time she seemed more like the old Abby.

"Abby, I've been doing a lot of thinking." She listened.

Michael tried not to sound like he was bragging. "I stand a good chance of getting an internship next summer with one of the top firms in New York City—in the world."

He might have said that he was getting an internship with the *Ozark Falls Gazette*. Abby did not understand the import of his words and she definitely did not seem impressed.

He continued. "These internships are some of the most coveted jobs in the City."

Still no impression. Man she was tough tonight. Michael wound up for the heavyweight punch.

“This particular internship I’m after pays something like two thousand dollars per week during the summer.”

“Per week?”

Finally, a response. “Yes, per week. If you do a good job, the internship turns into a permanent job upon graduation.”

Abby was still not letting off any signals.

“I was thinking that the kind of work that you’re doing down at the youth center is a dime a dozen in New York.”

Abby looked confused.

“If I worked part-time during the school year and you worked full-time until I graduated, I think that we could make—”

Abby stopped dancing. “What are you saying Michael?”

“I’m saying that I looked at this whole thing wrong before. I miss you and I want to marry you.”

Abby spun around and walked briskly out of the room. Michael stood silent and placed his hands on his hips. Did he just miss something? He was so bewildered; he didn’t notice all of the people who had witnessed the scene. He walked behind Abby. Maybe she was overcome with joy. Kathryn had told him that women get very emotional about these things. Cindy had been a basket case today.

He turned the corner and headed toward the church youth department. He wasn’t sure what door she had gone through. He walked down the lonely hallway. This is not what he’d imagined. He heard voices.

He opened the door. Todd McBride was asking Abby what was wrong.

Michael glared at his best friend. “What the hell are you doing?” he asked very slowly. Abby stopped crying.

“I don’t like your tone of voice young man,” Todd said.

This was a game they’d played since the two of them were in grammar school. Michael’s next line was supposed to be something funny.

This time Michael wasn’t joking. “Get out of here, Todd. Abby and I have a lot to talk about.” Todd turned to Abby.

“Ab, do you want me to leave?”

Michael had heard enough. What was this “Ab” stuff? Since when were they on a pet name basis? He walked up to Todd and stood nose-to-nose with his friend.

“Todd, I’m putting all jokes aside right now friend. I’m going to say this just one more time. Get out of here.”

Todd stared back defiantly. “Make me.”

That was all he needed. Michael grabbed Todd by the lapel and threw him toward the door. Todd fell over into a ruffled mess. Abby screamed and hit Michael in the arm.

“Stop it!” she yelled.

Michael wheeled around to look at his girl. What in the world was going on? He ran his fingers through his hair. David Knight opened the door and came into the room. There were several other men behind him.

They arrived a moment too late to prevent the flying body tackle that Todd put on Michael, sending him backwards into the chairs. One of the men was Lincoln Snow. He grabbed Abby’s hand and pulled her out of the room.

Michael put Todd in a headlock; a move perfected by much boyhood practice.

David, no slouch physically, pulled the men apart. He looked angrily at Michael.

“I’m ashamed of you Michael. This is Cindy’s day. Is this what they’re teaching you in New York?” Lincoln Snow couldn’t agree more. He had predicted this.

Michael released Todd’s neck. David apologized to Todd. Michael sat down in a kiddy chair. He’d only been gone four months. His whole town had turned against him.

David left him sulking in the heap. “Clean that up before you leave,” he said.

Michael grunted something back.

So that explained the lukewarm reception and the frequent references to Mr.

McBride. Even Lincoln was in on the thing. I guess he could be bought for a truck.

Michael stood to his feet. Later he would apologize to Cindy and Ramon. David was right about that part. As for the rest, “Way to look out for me big brother,” Michael said and exited through the back door.

He would take the long, cold walk home tonight and catch the first flight back to New York. James Joyce was right. You can never go home.

Chapter 30

Michael picked up the telephone in his Manhattan apartment. It was Ted.

“Grades are in big man, posted outside the student lounge. We did great. Actually you beat me by a point or two here or there for all of your faithful attendance.”

“How do you know my grades?”

“They’re posted right in front of me.”

“Aren’t they posted by social security number?”

“And?”

Michael sighed. It wasn’t worth the argument. “Well, exactly *how* did I do?”

“Top of the class. Ninety-eighth percentile is my guess.”

Michael screamed. He’d done it! He’d made the big score.

“It’s easy street from here on out big man. Justine’s tonight,” Ted said.

“You bet,” said Michael. Maybe he would even have an ale.

###

Just at that time Abby called Michael. He heard the click but let the cell phone ring. Ted was yelling something about needing a chauffeur. Abby left a message and hung up the telephone. She couldn’t believe that Michael had left town without saying goodbye. He’d completely misread the situation with Todd.

The time away had given her time to think. At first she was heartbroken but then she gradually came to appreciate her independence. She felt that it had been unfair for so many people to pressure Michael into getting married and settling down right away. Whatever this compulsion was inside of him, it was better that he got it out of the way. If their love was real, they would wait for each other.

All of this had been decided in her mind when out of left field comes a marriage proposal. She didn't want Michael's pity. She wanted to be wanted.

"Michael, I think we need to talk about the other night. There was a lot of misunderstanding. Please call me when you receive this. I love you," her voicemail said.

Michael hung up the telephone with Ted without checking Abby's message. "Cutler Sloan, here I come," he said.

###

The night was festive at Justine's. Teddy Danforth was holding court, bragging about Michael and Ted's stellar performance. The lawyers in the room had all, for the most part, graduated at the top of their classes and they knew what it was all about. The recognition felt good.

The only woman in the room was soon also to become a lawyer. Her name was Rebecca Cromwell, the youngest daughter of Oliver Cromwell, the British shipping magnate and Cutler's personal client. She was as stunningly beautiful as she was sharp. She was slender with long auburn hair. She looked like a young Ann-Margret. She also had one of the highest IQs in the room. Rebecca had placed somewhere in the top one or two percent of her class at Columbia Law.

Michael saw her as soon as she entered the room, escorted by none other than Cutler himself. Every man in the room was straining to admire the ravishing young beauty; some out of lust, some out of shock that a woman was allowed in the place.

This was one of Cutler's favorite tactics. Bringing Rebecca to this little soirée meant that he had the *power* to alter the rules. It also testified to the level of clientele on his roster and the company he kept.

Cutler walked over to the table and made the necessary introductions. Rebecca locked eyes and hands with Michael instantly. This wasn't lost on Michael, nor on Cutler who signaled the bar for his usual and proposed a toast to the three students.

"Here's to some of the best and brightest in the world." That was Cutler, always thinking globally.

The remaining men raised their glasses. Michael downed an ale. This also was not lost on Cutler. Was not this the abstainer? Michael looked at Rebecca and knew that she wanted to talk to him. He decided to relax and let the conversation come to him.

With daddy's watchdog and hopefully his future employer Cutler nearby, he wouldn't touch Madame Heiress with a ten-foot pole. His instincts were right. Cutler wanted to talk business.

"Danforth here tells me you're somewhere in the ninety-eighth percentile."

"Yes sir," Michael said. Cutler seemed pleased.

"Congratulations. I want you to come down to the Cutler Building tomorrow and see Janice Cartwright on the fifty-fourth floor. I have e-mailed her your name as a member of our upcoming internship program."

Michael was stunned. "Just like that?" was all he could manage to say.

Cutler clinked his glass of ale. "Just like that," he repeated.

Michael looked at Ted, who was also smiling. His space had been sewn up long ago. Welcome to the club his eyes were saying. Michael could hardly believe what was happening. So this is how it's done. He was learning fast.

Cutler patted his shoulder and then stooped again. "Oh, one more thing."

"Yes sir," Michael said.

“The young woman who came in with me—stunning isn’t she?” There was no good answer to that question. Michael nodded assent.

“She is the daughter of perhaps the richest man in Britain.” Cutler let the statement sink in. Her bloodline precedes *Beowulf*.” Michael was impressed.

“Her father is one of Cutler Sloan’s top clients and a close, personal friend. She’s been entrusted to my personal care and will be joining our summer program as well.”

Michael knew where he was going.

“I think she *fancies* you.” Now he was uncomfortable.

“I trust that a young man of your intelligence understands proper *protocol*.”

Michael straightened up. “Yes sir, of course I do.”

“Just checking,” Cutler said. “The other night, you weren’t a drinker.”

Michael looked at the glass in front of him. He wished he could have thrown the thing across the room. He could hear Jeremiah Knight’s voice in the background. “Don’t compromise, son, believe me, the unbelievers are watching you.”

He felt foolish. He’d damaged his testimony and looked insincere in front of his new employer. Nice job, Knight, he said to himself. You’ve just been scoring touchdowns all week long. He got up to go to the john.

Rebecca followed, ostensibly going to the ladies room as well. She watched him move down the dimly lit hallway a little groggy with ale. His dark hair cascaded over his broad shoulders. He looked rugged and athletic. This was no city boy. Summer would be a blast. Cutler observed the procession. He wondered whether he’d made the right decision.

Michael washed his face in the bathroom sink. He was no drinker. The ale had been strong. He wiped his face and stared into the mirror. "Who are you," he said under his breath.

Chapter 31

Summer came quickly and Michael had again aced his exams. He and Abby finally talked out the misunderstanding at Cindy's wedding. She hadn't been seeing Todd, but wanted time for them to sort themselves out.

Fine by me Michael thought, feeling more than a little rejected. The summer would be nuts anyway. This was the ultimate testing ground. He needed full concentration. His legal career would swing on how well he handled his summer responsibilities.

Cutler Sloan and firms like that didn't pay summer interns twenty-five hundred dollars a week for a summer vacation. They used the programs mercilessly to select the finest future attorneys the world had to offer. Michael had landed into a very elite bunch.

He took the subway to the Cutler Building and reported to Janice Cartwright on the fifty-fourth floor. There were twelve associates who would be located in Cutler Sloan's Wall Street offices.

The Cutler Building was massive and opulently furnished. The entire building had been decorated in highly polished brass, marble and dark mahogany wood. When Michael stepped into the fifty-fourth floor conference room, the view took his breath away. There were plate glass windows from floor to ceiling. The huge room looked like it could hold a football field.

Ted was already seated at the conference table, pad and pen at the ready. Bradford Dean, the "Summer Intern Partner" walked up and briskly shook Michael's hand.

"Welcome to Cutler Sloan, you must be Michael. I'm Brad." Michael squeezed his hand.

“That’s right. Nice to meet you Brad,” he said. Michael tried to take in the scene. There looked to be about nine people in the room so far. He was early. Seven men, a couple of women. No, make that three women.

As he tapped Ted on the shoulder, Rebecca Cromwell slid through the door and took a seat. Brad Dean just waved at her and went back to talking to a quirky looking brunette. Michael pretended not to notice her and took a seat beside Ted. He’d gotten the message loud and clear at Justine’s. Stay away from the magnate’s daughter. That would be the easiest of his assignments that summer, he was sure.

The remainder of his fellow interns made their way in and settled down. At precisely eight o’clock that morning, Brad Dean launched into a history of the firm and its exploits over the years. Samuel Sloan who started the firm in the late 1700s was good friends with George Washington, etcetera, etcetera.

Michael was a little bored, but the background was useful. He had not once looked at Rebecca which was probably the worst thing he could have done. Rebecca was one of the finest amateur steeplechase riders in the world. She was a classically trained cellist and a black belt in karate.

This was a woman who lived for challenge. So the hunky, dark-haired genius from Oz wanted to play hard to get. She was saddled and ready. The chase was on.

###

The test had been positive. Cindy was pregnant. The couple celebrated with David, Tara and Elsie. Jeremiah and Kathryn had also been excited, more grandbabies to add to David’s boys. Who could beat that?

Ramon had put the townhouse on the market and bought a bigger place in the Heights. Elsie had given up her apartment and moved in with the couple. The Lord had done a miracle of healing in their lives.

With Ramon's newfound faith he'd been able face the demons of the past and he'd made his peace. It was the future that was worrying him the most. He'd been praying and asking God to show him a way out of the Great Neck Shipping Company. He had to be careful. He'd come too far in putting his life back together to let it just slip away.

He had no misconceptions about Kristal and Sonny's mysterious disappearance in South America. Hiking trip, my rear, thought Ramon. Sonny Alvarado was from East Los Angeles. He wouldn't know a hiking trail from a parking lot.

In the back of his mind he thought he could hear the voice of God. "Trust me," He seemed to be saying. Ramon wasn't there yet. He would have to bide his time.

###

After orientation, Michael was shuffled to his new "office." This was cool he thought. He had a sweet view of the city and every electronic contraption imaginable. He ruffled through the papers. A voice buzzed in over the intercom.

"Please report to Mr. Cutler's office," the voice said.

Michael hustled up to the top floor of the building where all of the senior partners had offices. The spread was palatial. There were marble columns and exquisite Persian rugs. Marble and wood ran throughout and inlaid gold accented all of the furnishings.

The richest man in England pays for a lot of Cutler's hardware, thought Michael. Michael sat in the imposing foyer outside of Cutler's office until summoned. Cutler's assistant escorted him into the office. No wood and marble here.

The place was filled with contemporary pieces. The pieces of art looked like something out of a museum. Cutler had a spiral staircase that led upstairs to a private apartment. This man knew how to spend the clients' retainer checks.

Cutler waived him over to his sitting area enthusiastically. "If I have not already told you so, welcome to the firm."

"Thank you," Michael said, genuinely pleased to be in his service.

Cutler leaned back in his chair. "Every now and again even a stodgy old firm like this one has to mix things up a bit.

Michael was listening.

"Most of your fellow classmates will be assigned a Partner-in-Charge, sort of like a big brother who will see them through the summer. The assignments will be submitted through the various partners in the firm and assigned randomly to the summer intern pool depending upon workload."

Michael wondered why Cutler was wasting his eight hundred and fifty dollars per hour time telling him something that he had learned in orientation two hours ago. He nodded his head.

"Yes sir," he said.

Cutler continued. "Things will be a little different with you." Cutler had his full attention now.

"You will report directly to and get your assignments from me for the rest of the summer."

Michael wasn't sure whether to be flattered or *afraid*. "I understand," Michael said.

Cutler leaned into Michael. “My family has been at this law business for many generations. After a while you can identify the profile of the kind of people who are going to be extremely successful; and just as surely the ones who will fail.”

Michael was flattered.

“I think you are one of the successful breed; a real winner,” Cutler said.

Michael smiled.

“As I am sure you have already learned in your young life, the world is not fair. For instance, this firm receives over fifty thousand resumes per year from all of the top law schools and lawyers all over this globe.”

Michael shook his head in amazement.

“Yet you are here this morning, Mr. Knight. I have never seen your resume.”

Michael leaned back in his chair. It was true. He hadn’t interviewed with anyone. He hadn’t given references. He hadn’t done anything. He’d simply been the roommate of Teddy Danforth’s son, who aced his first semester exams. His inner spirit testified that this was all a little strange. But he silenced the voice. What did it matter? He’d gotten the grades. He was in the ninety-eighth percentile of law students nationwide. He’d worked hard for *this*.

Cutler continued. “Thus, as *my intern* you will have an office on this floor, which has been prepared for you. You will have your own personal assistant, paralegal and secretary. You will have access to my car service and access to my health club on the fortieth floor. You will discuss none of our matters with *anyone* and will report solely to me. Deal?” the man said and stuck out his hand.

“Deal,” said Michael and shook it.

“Oh, one final thing. As *my intern*, you will be paid thirty-five hundred a week and will receive a twenty thousand dollar summer bonus. Janice will connect you with my tailors. Please use the money and buy a wardrobe.

Michael was shell-shocked.

“Let’s take a walk over to your new office. Your first assignment awaits you there.”

Chapter 32

Gavin Dunne was known as a tough cop. He'd been working narcotics in New York City for the past twenty-five years out of the Manhattan Federal Bureau of Investigations. He had seen it all, he thought.

For the past five years he'd been working on the case to end all cases. He thought that he was onto a drug trafficking ring that reached to the highest levels of power in the nation. Some of the villains had roots going back for centuries to the bluest of the blue bloods. Any mistake on his part and they would head for cover.

He would also be in danger of losing his job . . . or his life. The perpetrators were making untold sums of money and had figured out how to launder the funds through an interlocking network of domestic and international corporations. It had been so easy that they'd gotten greedy, and sloppy.

His first big break came from the oddest of places, Costa Rica. A former combat buddy and mole had tipped him that an operative for one of the sham companies had been murdered several weeks ago. The newspapers reported it as some kind of freak hiking accident.

The mole said it was no accident. The victim had been trying to put together his own network to take a piece of the lucrative overseas market. The name of the man was Sonny Alvarado, a former marine and small-time hood.

Alvarado had been working for five years for the Great Neck Shipping Company, headquartered in Manhattan with a dozen branches worldwide. Tracking the company carefully showed that it had sister companies in at least eight European cities, South America and the Far East.

These interlocking companies had one thing in common; they were all in the shipping or logistics business. The problem was that many of these companies were legitimate Fortune 500 types. The network was like a huge maze in his head. Every time he got somewhere however, the trail ended at some squeaky clean corporate stalwart.

Any wrong moves with those folks would set off a chain of public accusations about overreaching governmental power and lawsuits. He had even attempted to engineer interviews with executives in some of these companies. No one would go near his investigation. Sure, everyone complained about drugs on the street and drugs in the schools. When it was time to step up and help Uncle Sam do something about it, it was always “no thank you very much.”

Dunne spat on the sidewalk. He had a theory of the case. This network had to be controlled by someone with enormous influence and contacts with some of the top corporations in the world. The person was playing both sides of the fence. He was equally at home in the light as in the shadows. Dunne just had to be patient and he would emerge.

This thing was not being pulled off by some gang-bangers from Brooklyn. Someone diabolical was in charge of this puppy.

###

Cutler opened the door to Michael’s new office. Michael stopped in his tracks. He thought he had died and gone to heaven in the office downstairs. This office was beyond belief. It was almost as large as Cutler’s and lavishly furnished. It had a private bar, dressing room and shower. It also had its own sleeping quarters.

Cutler looked out of the floor to ceiling plate glass windows at the stunning view of the city. "I hope you don't spook easy."

Michael didn't.

"This is the office of a former senior partner, Lloyd Murdock. Lloyd died in a skiing accident in Vail, Colorado last year."

"I'm sorry to hear about that," Michael said.

"Me too," said Cutler. "It will make a great temporary office for you, however."

Cutler walked over to Michael's new desk and pointed to the high-tech telephone.

"That key is hotwired to Janice. Just beep her if you need me at any time. She is the only one with my coordinates at all times. Your assistant's name is Brenda Lawson. She will be located right outside your door. I will send her in on my way out."

"Thanks," Michael said trying to take it all in.

Cutler turned on his heels in the doorway. "I almost forgot. Over there is a white box with a bunch of files in it. I need you to read and outline everything in the box this afternoon and be prepared to brief me in my office at 7:00 a.m. tomorrow. Understood?"

"Yes sir."

Michael sat down in the spacious sofa. His head was spinning. He heard a knock on the door. It was probably his new assistant. "Come in," he hollered, thinking that he would soon need her transcription services.

Rebecca Cromwell walked into the office and looked around. "Not bad for the first day on the job."

Chapter 33

Ramon sat aboard the company jet, bound for New York City. Diego-Vega was talking to Mack Stone about acquisition of some new companies overseas. The jet was beautifully furnished with deep leather seats and wooden paneling everywhere. It looked more like a luxury apartment, than something jetting at thirty thousand feet in the air.

Diego-Vega kept the plane immaculate at all times. You could eat off the floor. Ramon watched the men speak; both reclined in fat leather chairs. The marble desk between them was strewn with papers. Stone looked serious and intent. Diego-Vega, as always, made his points forcefully.

As the men continued working, the private attendants saw to their every whim. Ramon looked at the men and their smug self-importance. He used to live for this. Now he could only feel contempt and shame. They reminded him of certain men he'd been reading about in his men's Bible study.

In the book of Psalms, King David had asked the Lord to protect him from men like these: "Wicked men and deadly. Enclosed in their own fat they speak proudly. They were like lions greedy of prey and lurking in secret places, men of the world who had their portion in this life."

Ramon uttered a silent prayer. He needed a way out of this situation; *alive*. Diego-Vega had been true to his promise and had rewarded him with more executive level duties. He'd been shuttling back and forth to New York for months, meeting with Mack Stone and learning more about their expansive distribution and shipping networks.

He'd even managed to pop in on Michael a few times, for Cindy's sake, and given him a few bucks. The kid looked like he was making it; *legitimately*. Ramon was glad for

him. He was the only one in the family who had ever shown him friendship *before* his conversion.

Stone still felt that Ramon had married out of his league. His own love life was a joke. Kristal Alvarado had been a silly tart as far as he was concerned. She was looking for money and power like the rest of them. But Mrs. Cindy Sanchez was different. There was something about her. She was pure country air and no pretensions. She wouldn't care less about his money, or his looks. She'd married Ramon, hadn't she?

A woman like that could change a man's life. It seemed that she'd changed Ramon's. Stone hated to admit it but the guy had the distribution network down cold. He could get anything almost anywhere around the globe with accuracy and discretion. He was learning the business well and seemed to have lost the eight-ton chip off his shoulder. *Something* was different about Sanchez. It made Stone *almost* want to forget about his wife.

###

Michael jumped to his feet. What is she doing up here?

"You look like you've seen a ghost. Do I scare you?"

Michael didn't want to play her game. The most celebrated lawyer in New York had just handed him the keys to the City and no one was going to get in his way. He laughed and pointed at her.

"What scares me is how much work our new boss just poured on me. You see those boxes in that corner over there? I've got to read every document in there and summarize it by seven in the morning."

"I suppose that means you're not free for dinner."

Michael laughed again. She was unflappable. He still had his wits about him but the compliment felt good.

“I’m sure you could find any number of dinner partners around here,” he said.

“None as connected as you Mr. Corner Office.”

Michael laughed out loud. “Mr. what?”

“Corner Office. That’s what they’re calling you downstairs.”

“Give me a break. I haven’t been up here ten minutes. I’m going to be Cutler’s slave for the summer and he needs me within whip’s length. That’s about it. I wouldn’t be so fast to glamorize my location.”

“Don’t shoot the messenger.” She turned and headed toward the door.

Michael felt relieved. He couldn’t throw her out. But he’d been warned by Cutler and he didn’t want to be seen with her hanging around his office.

“Well if dinner is out, we can always order in,” she said playfully. “These corner offices have excellent accommodations, I’m told.”

Michael thought of the cozy suite attached to his new digs. A candlelit dinner for two. He quickly caught himself. “Sorry Abby, but my date is stacked up in that corner right there,” he said, pointing to Cutler’s assignment.

Rebecca looked at him puzzled.

“Pardon me?” she said.

Michael instantly recognized his mistake. “Nothing,” he said. “I’ll see you later, Rebecca. I’d better get down to some work,” he said, moving quickly toward his pile.

The woman looked offended and disappeared through the door. He breathed a sigh of relief. The slip of the tongue had at least gotten her out of his office.

“Nice job, Clark Gable,” he muttered under his breath.

###

At eleven o'clock that night Ramon was alone in his suite at the Plaza Hotel. Diego-Vega had been assured by the New York lawyers that his overseas acquisitions were moving in the right direction.

Ramon had heard Mack Stone complain in the past about the amount of unnecessary legal fees paid by the company, but Diego-Vega did nothing without his lawyers. It was one of the first things he taught Ramon. Skimp on overhead, skimp on luxuries, if necessary, but never skimp on legal protection. The ocean was infested with killer sharks. One always needed a bigger one.

He called Michael, but he wasn't at home. What was he doing out at eleven o'clock on a Monday night? He made a mental note to wire him a few bucks in the morning.

Ramon remembered the scene on his wedding night. He hoped that Michael wasn't going the way of the world. He'd been down that path and had gotten the T-shirt. Now, he desperately wanted to get rid of it. He would love to sit him down and tell him what was at the end of the search for money, broads and power. Ramon looked out of his window into the sky. His wife was newly pregnant and they were just at the beginning of their journey. He couldn't do anything stupid to risk his life, or worse, hers.

He'd plunged himself into a pit. He couldn't see the bright lights of New York anymore. Everything looked dark. There was no one in the world he could turn to. When he thought of the things he'd done in hotel rooms like this one, he hung his head in shame and wept.

“Oh God in heaven,” he cried. “Deliver me from my enemies and take me out of this pit. Oh Father, rescue me, and I will serve you all the days of my life.” He quietly walked to his bed. Exhausted by the weight of his circumstances, he fell instantly asleep.

And God was pleased with Ramon’s request. His surrender was a pleasing and acceptable sacrifice; a reasonable act of service and spiritual worship. Ramon Sanchez was right where the Lord God wanted him.

###

Earlier that day Michael also had an epiphany. After fending off Dickey Simpson, Ted Danforth and a few other well-wishers, he finally dragged Cutler’s boxes over to his desk. He broke out his micro recorder and prepared himself to lay it on Brenda Lawson, his assistant. He opened the first box and dug up only a bunch of old onion-skinned bills of lading and what seemed to be shipping manifests.

He opened the second box and pulled out what seemed to be a legal file. The file label read: BAHAMA FREIGHTLINES ACQUISITION – GREAT NECK SHIPPING & LOGISTICS, LLC.

“Great Neck Shipping is Ramon’s company,” he said to himself. Small world. Maybe he would get to work on this acquisition. Sweet. He would have to call Ramon and Cindy and brag about it. He was now Ramon’s lawyer. What a hoot.

Chapter 34

Gavin Dunne got a kick out of hanging around in places like the Plaza Hotel. He enjoyed observing how the other half, or more accurately, the other two percent or so, lived. This morning he had an early appointment with a certain Ramon Sanchez of Richmond Heights, Missouri.

Ramon did not know about the appointment, but that was irrelevant. This was a meeting he could hardly afford to miss. His future, in fact, depended upon it. Dunne had run the Sonny Alvarado lead into the ground. Every trail from Sonny led right to Mr. Sanchez's doorstep.

Military records showed that they were marine buddies and had settled in the same area of Missouri. Sanchez had worked directly for Alvarado for a time. It seems that some kind of power struggle had occurred and Alvarado left the country. Shortly after that, Sonny Alvarado and his wife turned up missing and Mr. Sanchez got a major promotion and upgrade in housing. Isn't that just convenient? With friends like Ramon Sanchez . . . He felt no pity for Sonny Alvarado. Punks like that deserved what they got. One less parasite on the street.

Dunne was a veteran. He knew just how to play this hand. Ramon Sanchez was a bit player in the great scheme of things. The real prize was his boss, Raul Diego-Vega aka Paolo Vega aka Francisco Diego.

Nailing the street scum-turned-kingpin would not be easy. He'd bought some very expensive legal protection and political influence. The evidence would have to be airtight. He needed an insider like Sanchez; a journeyman who could name names, but could use some federal protection.

“Good morning Mr. Sanchez,” he said as Ramon passed him seated in the luxurious hotel lobby. Ramon stopped and looked him.

“Were you speaking to me?” he asked.

Dunne folded his newspaper. “You are Ramon Ernesto Sanchez, are you not? Only son of Ellesandra and the late Pedro Sanchez.”

Ramon looked to the left and to the right. He didn’t like what he was hearing. “Okay genius, so you looked up my family tree on the Internet. You’ve got ten seconds.”

Dunne leaned back in the plush chair and crossed his right leg at the ankle. “What do you think a chair like this cost?”

Ramon had heard enough. He began to walk away. He was trying not to show it but Dunne unnerved him. Diego-Vega had warned him about talking to Colombo-types like this joker. Shut up and call Stone if necessary was the protocol.

“Hey Ramon, it’s your wife and baby I’m worried about.” Dunne’s Missouri counterparts had been gathering intelligence, including trailing Cindy and Kathryn to the local Baby Super Mart. Ramon stopped walking. He turned and strutted back to Dunne. Standing over the ruddy Irishman, Ramon tried to keep his cool.

“Okay friend, I’m through playing your word games. You better start explaining yourself —”

“Or what, Ramon? You going to kill me like you killed Sonny Alvarado?”

Ramon froze in panic. “Who are you man?”

“The man who is going to see to it that you rot in jail for what you’ve done, you piece of slime,” Dunne said slowly, lancing the words into Ramon’s psyche.

Panic set in. Ramon turned and ran from the Plaza Hotel. He ran for his life.

###

Michael was bleary-eyed but he had summarized Cutler's boxes. When you cut through all of the junk, it seemed that Great Neck was in the process of acquiring a Bahamian shipping line that was owned by a holding Company domiciled in the UK. It didn't look like a good investment. The company was leaking money like a faucet. That was probably none of his business although he would point it out to Cutler.

He couldn't find any law that seemed to prohibit the transaction. At 6:50 a.m. sharp he seated himself outside Cutler's office and waited for his summons. Cutler invited him in. He seemed upbeat and ready to hear Michael's summary of the boxes. Michael gave him his report and opinion about the finances, which, as he had suspected Cutler had no interest in.

Cutler seemed pleased. "So that is the sum and substance of it," he asked.

"That is all that was there sir," Michael said.

Cutler smiled. "Then excellent young man. You will find a nifty paper shredder in Lloyd's . . . your closet. I'll hold onto your summary. Kindly shred all of those documents."

Michael paused. The documents did not seem significant but this seemed irregular. "Sir?" he asked.

"This was merely an exercise in your ability to master voluminous facts, son, and to discern what is legally efficacious and what is not. You have passed with flying colors. Those documents are worthless."

Michael smiled. "Thank you sir, I'll have Ms. Lawson get right on it."

“Oh no, that won’t do at all, Michael. Ms. Lawson is a lower level employee. Learn this—you are the lawyer.” Michael liked the sound of that. Cutler went on.

“There are certain responsibilities of our noble profession that are *non-delegable*.”

“I just thought that since the documents were unimportant—”

“*All* client matters are important, if not *useful*” he said and dismissed him with his eyes.

“Thank you sir,” Michael said.

“Oh, please see Ms. Cartwright on your way out. She has your signing bonus. I know that you were up all night on this. Take my car service and go buy yourself threads. I have some clients I’d like you to meet.”

Michael thanked him again and collected his check from Ms. Cartwright. Alone in his office he opened it and peeked in the envelope. Twenty thousand dollars, the equivalent of his first year salary as a youth minister in Ozark Falls. He’d hit the big time. He wanted to celebrate . . . with Abby. What was the use? They were in different worlds now. She had rejected his proposal. His wealthy best friend had started hanging around and suddenly she wanted *space*.

If that was the way she wanted it, then that was fine with him. He stuck the check in his coat pocket and hung it in the office closet. There, built into the wall was the heavy duty shredder. We Cutler Sloan boys spare no expense. He grabbed the first box and took out a file. “Just following orders,” he said.

###

Dunne followed Ramon onto the sidewalk and lit a cigarette. The kid had jumped in a limo that exited the scene in a hurry. The initial skirmish had gone far better than he’d

imagined. Sanchez was definitely scared. His intelligence said he was young but a tough-guy-wannabe. He had expected the usual garbage about Diego-Vega's company lawyer or some kind of tough punk routine.

Dunne was feeling encouraged. He was definitely onto something.

###

Inside the speeding limo Ramon's heart was gripped in the icy hand of fear. He hadn't followed protocol and called Mack Stone. He could trust no one. The man accused *him* of killing Sonny *and* Kristal Alvarado.

That dude was definitely some form of law enforcement, probably FBI. That meant he was under suspicion . . . of a double homicide! The thought alone made him want to pass out. Oh God he had come so far into the light. A double homicide conviction meant that he would swing or rot in jail like the man had said.

He had to think clearly. What evidence did they have? Nothing. He hadn't been anywhere near Sonny or Kristal when they allegedly got lost in the jungle. He was in the States. Mack Stone could prove that.

Ramon's heart pounded. Stone. That lowlife had had his eye on Cindy since day one. He wouldn't lift a finger to help Ramon. Diego-Vega would also run for cover. The Lord had opened his eyes to this man. Chin was right. The man was a *coward*.

And what about Chin? Were they looking at that too? That was self-defense. Chin and his henchmen were notorious killers. He may have been stupid but he was no *murderer*.

He could see it all before him. Diego-Vega would hide behind Stone and his army of outside lawyers. He would be left twisting in the wind. Think. When was the last time you saw Sonny or Kristal alive?

Terror struck his heart again. Stone had sent him on business to Costa Rica two weeks before they were reported missing. He didn't have time to visit with Sonny, but that was irrelevant. The fact was that Stone had placed him on the island within two weeks of the bodies being found. That would show that he had had the opportunity. He'd ascended to Sonny's position right after his disappearance. That was motive. Diego-Vega had the resources to plant whatever evidence he needed to implicate Ramon.

A tear streamed down his cheek. "Oh my God," he said. "I've been set up."

Chapter 35

Michael finished the job and called the car service. Ms. Lawson handed him a thick file. Mr. Cutler wants you to be prepared to discuss this when he returns from Aspen on Friday. Michael threw the file on his desk.

He'd just banged through twelve boxes of documents in one night. That file looked like a piece of cake. Right now, the boss had given him a free pass and he intended to use it. He dialed the car service and headed to the building carport where the partners were taxied to and fro. A black tinted Lincoln Town Car pulled up and rolled down the window.

"Mr. Knight?" the man said.

"That's me," Michael said as he moved to the back entrance. He could certainly get used to this. He slicked his hair and jumped into the back seat.

"I have reservations for lunch uptown," said Rebecca Cromwell.

###

At lunchtime Ramon was still circling New York City wondering about his next move. Maybe he should talk to the Feds. That was sure death or some kind of witness protection program. They would never see their families again. God had just restored what little family he had and had given him one of his own. Plus, it was way too risky. Diego-Vega would make sure that some loved one would disappear in another "freak" accident.

He thought of just going into any church and talking to a pastor. He wouldn't get an answer to his problems but he would have someone to talk to. He had to reason this out with someone. Who could he trust?

The thought hit him like a bolt of lightning: Michael. He would confide in Michael. He was a levelheaded kid who hadn't condemned him or Cindy when they were away from God. He was a lawyer; well almost, and a pastor—again, almost. He was the only person in New York City who he could trust. He would tell him everything. He longed to unload this burden. He had given it to the Lord but he needed to talk it out with someone, to gain some perspective.

He dialed Michael's apartment. That was stupid; he would be at work at this time of day. What firm did he work for again? Cindy would know. He got the name and number and called Michael. Brenda Lawson answered Michael's extension.

"Mr. Knight is out for the afternoon," she said.

Out for the afternoon? Maybe they took him to court or something. Ramon circled around and decided to stay in the city an additional night. He would catch up to Michael later at his apartment. He needed to find a place to lie low for a few hours.

###

"What is it with you?" Rebecca said. "Is it *Abby*?"

Michael shook his head. "You never cease to amaze. Let me try again and explain why having lunch today is a very bad idea." Michael tried to talk out of earshot of the driver.

"There isn't anything *with* me, and Abby is my former girl who is now apparently involved with my best friend. Now that you know all of my personal business, let me be frank with you. I have absolutely nothing against you. You're obviously a very intelligent and a beautiful young woman."

Rebecca grinned.

“The problem is that I am under strict orders to stay away from you. It’s just that simple. Are you ready for some more straight talk?”

Rebecca was now starting to steam.

Michael continued. “And, I’m not willing to blow the start of my career—”

Rebecca turned and faced him, tears welling in her eyes. “You’ve said enough,” she said and started to exit the vehicle.

Michael grabbed her arm. “I’m sorry,” he said. “I didn’t mean—”

“No one ever does. I am so sick and tired of everyone else in the world trying to live my life. I can’t even get a job without my father hiring his cronies like Cutler to police me around.” Michael could relate.

“Why won’t they let me be who *I* want to be? Why can’t I choose my own friends? Why are they always shoving me around?”

Michael threw his arm around her and pulled her to his side. “Don’t go, let’s do lunch.”

Chapter 36

Three hours later Michael's lunch date had not concluded. The couple told each other everything there was to know about each other, it seemed. Michael was skating on thin ice. Rebecca was truly beautiful. She was full of charm and culture. She had great stories that made his side split with laughter. He had never met anyone like her.

They were in a little bistro near Rockefeller Center and the atmosphere was magic. Michael had taken off his tie and unbuttoned the neck of his shirt. He looked rugged and masculine. His blue eyes glimmered. She was one of the richest young women in the country. He had twenty thousand dollars in his pocket. They had money to burn.

"From the first time I saw those blue eyes in Justine's, I knew that we would be sitting here," she said. "This is my favorite place."

"I had no such aspirations my dear. I could tell that you were way out of my league."

"O ye of little faith."

"Oh you know a little Bible, huh?"

"Does that matter to you?"

Michael leaned in closer. "Yeah, it does. Sometimes I'm not sure how it all fits into *this* world, but I'm trying to figure it out."

"Let's not talk religion, preacher man, let's shop!" she said, eyes blazing.

"Let's do it."

###

Dunne tracked Ramon to a Sheraton downtown. Not exactly the Plaza. He put out his cigarette. He now had his man on the run. He would wait patiently for their next encounter.

The punk looked guilty as sin. Dunne would wear him down until he cracked like an egg; until he handed him the Great Neck Shipping front and the people behind the criminal enterprise. He was sure that Sanchez held an important key in the big jigsaw puzzle in his mind.

For months, his team had been listening to Diego-Vega with no results. The only thing they had been able to ascertain recently was there would be a big meeting this evening at a lavish apartment owned by Diego-Vega on the Upper East Side.

Filthy scum, thought Dunne. These vermin lived like kings while they poisoned the world with their contraband traffic. They were so rich and protected they felt that they were untouchable. They sipped champagne and ate caviar while they destroyed the innocent. Dunne vowed in his heart that every one of them would get theirs. He swore it to his dying breath.

###

“Are you going to the cocktail party tonight?” Rebecca asked.

Michael threw their many packages into the rear of the Town Car. “Cutler said something about meeting some clients. Are you invited?”

“I believe that some of those clients are representatives from one of my dad’s companies, Bahamian Freightways.”

Michael recognized the name right away. That was the shipping line that had been bleeding money and was being acquired by Ramon’s company, Great Neck.

“Oh yeah, I know . . .” Michael bit his tongue. Cutler had warned him about client confidentiality. Rebecca waited for him to finish.

“I know your father has substantial interests all over the globe,” he said.

“I’ll be there too,” she said ignoring the comment. “And I’ll be wearing . . . this.”

Rebecca pulled out a red form-fitting dress that he’d helped her select that afternoon. Michael pictured how she would look tonight in that red dress, long auburn hair flowing over her shoulders.

They pushed the packages over and slid in close. Rebecca leaned her head against his shoulder. He could smell her hair, the exquisite perfume that filled the car with its lure. Rebecca held his hand and lifted it gently. She examined all of its lines and curves. She tilted her head slightly and looked into his eyes.

“You have such beautiful, strong hands.” Her words poured like honey from her perfect mouth. The red lipstick cried out the invitation.

The Town Car purred effortlessly along Fifth Avenue. Michael’s head was light. His heart pounded fast. He was standing again, in Abby’s back yard, watching her from afar under the oak tree. He was sitting in Justine’s, being warned by Jack Cutler. The voice of the Lord came to him again: “Before I made you in the womb I knew you and I have called you to preach to thousands.” Michael’s hands were sweating. Rebecca cradled her nose under his neck.

“No,” his heart cried to the legacy of his fathers.

“No,” his heart cried to God’s version of his life.

“No,” his heart cried to the escape hatch God always made available.

“No,” his heart cried into the face of the God who would not take no for an answer.

Michael tilted Rebecca’s cheek upward. A lock of his dark hair fell partially over his eyes. His eyes communicated the weight of his decision. There would be no turning back now. Rebecca cooed her compliance.

The Town car floated over supple streets. Michael and Rebecca were lost in their first kiss. Caught up in the moment, they had failed to remember Jack Cutler's driver.

Chapter 37

Todd McBride pulled his SUV into Abby's driveway. He had invited her out to an early movie that evening. Feeling a little bored she'd taken him up on the invitation. It was a bad movie and bad idea.

Todd was Michael's best friend in life. What was she trying to prove? She was afraid that she'd given everyone, including Todd, the wrong impression. She would have to set things straight right away. Life sure had its twists. For the past four years she'd waited for Michael to propose marriage. The man had finally said the word and what had she done? Run off like a fool.

Todd leaned his face in her direction. "I had a great time tonight, Abby."

"Me too," she lied.

"Abby, I know what I am about to say may sound awkward—"

"Let me go first Todd. I really thank you for watching out for me in Michael's absence, but I think my fight with Michael is really about silly stuff. We belong together Todd, and I'm going to accept Michael's marriage proposal."

Todd leaned back toward the driver's seat. He was smiling from ear to ear. "I wanted to tell you the same thing Ab. You and Michael were made for each other. Just like I couldn't have another best friend, I don't think Michael could ever have another woman. Just let me know what color tux."

Abby reached over and embraced Todd. They'd all grown up together. They all caught chicken pox and ear infections, lost their teeth and faced their first heartbreaks together. Michael and Todd were the jocks and Abby was the cheerleader. They were family. Todd wiped a tear from her eye.

“Aw, don’t get sappy on me,” he said.

Abby exited the vehicle and entered her home. She felt a new sense of excitement. Lincoln had been watching the exchange in the SUV and saw her burst through the front door. He was waiting for her to say something but she just ran past him with a quick, “Hey Daddy.”

Lincoln scratched his head. Maybe she’d finally forgotten the ex-preacher boy, Michael. Maybe she would marry into the McBride empire. He needed a new truck.

Abby closed the door of her room and grabbed the telephone. She would call Michael and apologize. They would patch everything up. They would begin again.

###

Ramon had tried to reach Michael all day. No dice. He was expected to attend Diego-Vega’s big cocktail party tonight and there was no way out of that. He would play it cool and keep his ears open. Perhaps Diego-Vega or Stone would give something away that would help him extricate himself from this mess.

His heart despaired. Had he come this far to spend the rest of his days in prison, framed for crimes he didn’t commit? He thought of the bank account number with the million dollars that Diego-Vega had given him. He would destroy the information. He hadn’t touched the money and wouldn’t. None of that money could be traced to him. What else was there?

Nothing. He had nothing on Diego-Vega. Stone kept all the records. They were iron clad. They could build a case of circumstantial evidence against him a mile high. They had played him for a Class A fool.

Chapter 38

Michael turned to leave his apartment when the telephone rang. He was running late but listened to the message out of curiosity. It was Abby. She wanted to talk. Michael felt a twinge of regret, but gritted his teeth.

A new era had dawned in his life. He would have to work this out with Abby later. Right now, the most exciting woman in New York City was anxiously waiting for him at the client appreciation cocktail party. He would not be late.

Michael arrived at Raul Diego-Vega's Fifth Avenue apartment. The apartment was massive. It was like a mansion built into a skyscraper. Michael tried to take it all in. The place was fully-decorated with expensive artwork, and antique furnishings. A huge outdoor balcony overlooked New York City.

Cutler was standing among several older women with plastic-looking skin holding court. They hung on every word. He'd just flown in from Washington where he had testified before a Senate ethics panel on corporate governance. He had dinner at the White House with the Prime Minister of Ethiopia. The women oohed and aahed. If they were lucky enough, one day they might have the privilege of paying enormous rates for his services.

Michael spied the room for Rebecca. No sign. He began to mingle. Ted Danforth approached him first.

"There he is; assistant top dog."

Michael raised his glass of Evian. "Jealous?"

"You bet. Don't forget who got you here, big boy. That's another rule of the game, Grasshopper."

Michael bowed. "Yes master."

###

Ramon was a poor detective. He was standing inside a billiard room with Mack Stone trying to piece together the dates and times surrounding his last trip to Costa Rica preceding Sonny's death. True to his name, Mack was like a stone. He never gave anything away that he didn't intend for the recipient to receive. Kristal Alvarado had learned that the hard way. He just kept shooting pool and speaking to Ramon in generalities. Even Ramon's company was better than standing within earshot of Cutler.

"How's the wife?"

"Pregnant," Ramon said.

Stone stood up. He shook Ramon's hand heartily. It was the first time Ramon had ever seen him display any warmth. Stone aimed at a three ball.

"You pick any names yet?"

"We'll name him Peter after my father or Kathryn after Cindy's mother."

Stone took aim at the eight ball. "Congratulations, Ramon Sanchez."

"Twisted crook," Ramon said in his heart. The eight ball rolled across the table and into the hole.

"Game," said Mack Stone.

"Nice shot," said Michael walking past the shooter and up to Ramon. Startled, Ramon returned Michael's embrace.

"God be praised," said Ramon in his heart. The sovereign Lord was still on his throne.

###

Abby hung up the telephone disappointed. It seemed that Michael was hardly ever at home anymore. Where could he be at this time of night? The Lord impressed it upon her heart to pray for him. She knelt beside her bed.

“Dear Lord, stretch out your hand and keep Michael. Protect him from danger and cover him with your mercy. Help us to work out our difficulties and start all over. In Jesus’ name I pray, amen.”

###

Rebecca Cromwell was turning heads. She was immaculately dressed in Michael’s red dress. She glided across the room like a ballerina. She had one objective in mind; locate Michael Knight.

“Thanks,” Mack Stone said to Michael as he moved in to embrace Ramon. He could appreciate a man who could appreciate his pool playing. Ramon and Michael released their greeting. Mack stuck out his hand.

“I’m Mack Stone.”

“Michael Knight,” said Michael. “I’m one of Cutler Sloan’s summer interns.”

“Oh, the privileged few,” said Stone.

“I keep hearing that. Who do you work for?” Michael asked.

“One of your biggest clients. I’m General Counsel to Great Neck Logistics, Ramon’s company.”

Ramon nodded weakly. Michael again bit his tongue. If Cutler wanted them to know he was working on their documents he would let them know.

“I know of your company,” he said. “Ramon is my brother-in-law.” Michael had caught Stone’s attention.

“So you’re Cindy’s brother?”

Michael looked at Ramon who looked a little suspicious, but then he always did.

“You know my sister?”

“Only through company channels,” he said. “Ramon tells me you’re going to be an uncle.”

“So I’ve heard.”

“Do yourselves a favor. Tell him to stay away from a law career.”

Michael and Stone laughed. Ramon was worried. Michael was working for Great Neck’s main outside law firm. That was trouble. Now he really needed to speak with him.

“Can you excuse us, Mack? We have a little family business to discuss.”

Ramon motioned for Michael to follow him to the bar. He had to be careful. Act normal. But he had to warn Michael about the dogs that he was lying with. These dogs were deadly. He was likely to pick up more than fleas.

They were standing at the bar when Michael caught Rebecca’s attention. She breezed in front of him so that he would see her first. And he did, immediately losing attention in whatever Ramon had been saying.

“Excuse me, Ramon; let me introduce you to someone.” He walked over and touched Rebecca on the elbow.

“You look gorgeous,” he said. Rebecca beamed. “Let me introduce you to my brother-in-law, Ramon. He’s a high flyer at one of our major clients.”

Rebecca held out her hand and smiled. Ramon tried to be pleasant.

“Pleased to meet you, Ms. Cromwell. Do you think I could steal Michael away for a few minutes?”

Rebecca looked at Michael. “Why certainly,” she said and smiled again.

Michael glared at Ramon as if to say, “can’t it wait?” While Rebecca eased alongside the bar, Ramon took his chance.

“Michael, we seriously have to talk—” He could see that Michael had not heard anything he said and had eyes locked on Rebecca. He tried to keep his cool. “Michael, you’re not listening—”

“I’m going to take a walk over to the side garden,” Rebecca interrupted and began to move away from the bar.

A side garden in a Manhattan apartment? Amazing, thought Michael. “Wait a minute, I’m coming with you.” He brushed Ramon aside. “Hey bro, I’ll catch up with you later.”

Ramon was stunned. What happened to Michael and who was this new chick? He blew out a sigh. “Yeah, bro, later.”

Chapter 39

Ramon kicked the bar stool. Michael had been gone for thirty minutes. He would have to find him. There was no way that he could appreciate the kind of danger he was in. He wandered off in search of his brother-in-law throughout the cavernous apartment.

Michael was leaning against a balcony and admiring the lush outside garden. Rebecca was seated on a small bench. She was inviting him to fly to England to watch her compete in the steeplechases.

Michael looked at the delightful woman. Was he falling for her?

“May I have a word with you, Mr. Knight?” It was Jack Cutler’s voice. “I have meetings on Wall Street for the first half of the day, but would like to see you at 2:15 p.m. tomorrow; sharp.”

“Yes sir,” Michael said and snapped back to reality. He remembered his pledge to stay away from Rebecca. Was Cutler going to send him packing? He looked at Rebecca concerned. His eyes said, “I told you so.”

Rebecca stood to her feet. “He can’t touch you Michael. He’s just following orders from Dad, but I’ve spoken to Dad about you. He wants to meet you.”

Michael was taken aback, but somehow pleased. She’d told her parents about *him*?

“My father’s interests are the single highest paying components of this firm. Jack Cutler can’t make a move that my Dad doesn’t approve. Forget that old bully. Let’s enjoy the night.”

Ramon came around the bend and observed Rebecca leaning into Michael. This was bad. There was no way Abby could compete with that kind of fire power. He interrupted the two.

Rebecca looked at Ramon, annoyed, like he was an impudent serving boy. “Can we help you?”

Michael tried to signal Ramon to leave them alone. He would not leave. Michael knew that Ramon could be stubborn. He excused himself.

“This better be good.”

“Who’s the snobby rich chick?”

“Ramon, I’m sure there’s a point in this discussion somewhere. I’d like you to get to it,” Michael said without patience.

“I’m staying at the Sheraton downtown. Come see me tonight,” he said.

“No can do. We’re going for a drive around the city later.”

“Michael, you don’t know . . . just come see me tonight. I’m getting out of here.”

Ramon turned and looked at Michael. Be careful Michael and please come see me.”

Michael nodded in agreement. Why the big drama? He hustled back to Rebecca.

###

Dunne saw Ramon leave and followed him back to the Sheraton. He wanted to observe the foot traffic in and out of the hotel that night. Dunne had a hunch that Ramon was working with several other individuals. Lower level punks like Sanchez always messed up eventually. They would either get greedy, stupid or both. In the morning when the dust settled, he would make the young man an offer he couldn’t refuse. For tonight, he would wait to see if the newfound lead would throw off any other goodies.

###

“Meet me at my place in an hour,” Rebecca said and handed Michael a piece of paper with her address.

Michael paused. "I've got to meet someone downtown," he said.

"You still can. I want to play for you."

Michael forgot that she was a cellist. "That would be nice."

###

Ramon looked at the clock and wondered what was keeping Michael. It was past midnight. It was probably the chick in the red dress. God help him.

Inside Rebecca's loft, Michael was in deep trouble. The woman played with softness and fire, losing herself in the haunting music. Her beauty and talent transfixed him.

Summoning all of the strength he had remaining, he got up and began to excuse himself.

"My appointment downtown is going to kill me," he said.

"Oh, you're seeing another girl?"

Michael took her in his arms and gave her a goodnight kiss. "There is no other girl."

"Then stay with me," she said.

"I've got to go."

"Stay."

"You heard me."

"Pretty please."

"Just five more minutes."

Chapter 40

Ramon sprang out of his sleep. It was five-thirty in the morning. Where is Michael? He checked his message light. No message. Ramon sat on the edge of the bed. It was the chick. He was sure of it.

###

Michael tiptoed out of the apartment and closed the door. He left Rebecca sleeping. The building doorman arranged a taxi and he headed downtown toward his apartment.

He felt lower than an ant. For the first time since coming to New York he didn't feel so smart. He knew for sure that he was well outside of his league. He had broken a sacred vow with Abby, with himself and with God. He had certainly brought shame upon Rebecca, her family and the firm. He deserved whatever Cutler would do or say later that day in their meeting. He would resign, if necessary. He hung his head and wept.

He'd tried to play their game, but he was not ready for it. Now he understood what Jeremiah preached about living your life as if God was watching, which of course, He was. You'll either stand for God or fall for anything. He wished he could talk to Jeremiah right now.

Since Ramon and Cindy's wedding he'd drifted far away from home. He hadn't even stuck around to talk to Jeremiah at length about his illness. He was so caught up in his new life he hadn't called to follow-up. This is not the way it was supposed to be. How did he ever wind up at this place? It was early, but maybe he should go and talk to Ramon anyway. Ramon lived in the real world. Ramon would relate.

"Downtown Sheraton," he said to the taxi driver.

###

Per the clock hands, it was 4:30 a.m. Kathryn had not been able to sleep. Jerry's tests had come back late in the afternoon. The cancer was spreading—fast. The doctors could not predict how much time was left on the clock. He could go at any time Dr. Connors had said.

Jerry tried to be practical and strong. He called their lawyer and made sure his papers were in order. Now it was time to call the kids. She would have to send a ticket for Michael to come quickly. There was no telling how much time was left.

Kathryn sat up in bed and stared at Jeremiah. He was such a good man and father. He was her best friend in the world. Tears sprang to her eyes. She would not give up so easily. She would pray without ceasing. She wiped her eyes and went into their den. She knelt by Jeremiah's favorite chair and poured out her soul to the Lord.

“Oh merciful Lord, heal your servant,” she began.

###

Ramon jumped at the heavy bang on the hotel door. It was Michael. He opened the door and let him in. Gavin Dunne, seated in the Sheraton lobby, checked his watch. His hunch had been right after all. Intelligence had placed Sanchez's guest at Diego-Vega's party. Something was afoot.

Michael took off his jacket and threw it across a chair. He sat down.

“I'm glad you didn't race to get over here, sport,” Ramon said. Michael didn't laugh. Ramon sensed that something was wrong.

“You got something that you want to talk about?”

That was an understatement. Michael looked at Ramon. “No, you shoot first. I think my story is a little more complicated than yours. Go ahead,” Michael said.

Ramon sat at the edge of the bed and rubbed his hands together. There was no pretty way of telling Michael his story. He was not sure where to begin.

“I need some legal advice,” he said with a look of worry on his face.

Michael almost burst into laughter. He knew Ramon would be good for something, if even for a little comic relief. “Ramon, I’m no lawyer. Believe me, in a few hours that will become very evident—”

“You’re what I got,” said Ramon. It was pointless arguing with him. He wanted a lawyer.

“Alright, Ramon, fire away. I’m all ears.”

“Go ahead and pray for us, man, I can’t think straight,” Ramon said.

Michael’s hands twitched. He wasn’t prepared to ask God for anything. He couldn’t remember the last time he had stopped to pray for anyone or to spend some quiet time alone with God, habits that had been a part of his life for years.

Michael shamefacedly muttered a short prayer and then looked at Ramon. “Let’s hear it bro,” he said.

Ramon squirmed at the edge of the bed. “Michael, I’m a crook. And I work for a criminal enterprise that is known as the Great Neck Shipping and Logistics Company.”

Michael rumbled his eyebrows. “What are you talking about? Great Neck Shipping is one of Cutler Sloan’s top clients. The company has been around for a hundred years. I’m not supposed to say anything, but even I’ve worked on some Great Neck matters,” Michael embellished. “It’s all legit, Ramon, believe me.”

Ramon shook his head slowly. Michael had heard enough.

“Don’t give me the ‘poor misguided slob’ routine,” Michael said. “Since you’re looking for legal advice, Ramon, let me ask you a legal question. What specific evidence do you have of any criminal activity by any of the owners or managers of Great Neck?”

Ramon gave Michael the same look. “What time do you have to be in the office?” he said.

###

Rebecca Cromwell was an early riser. She noticed immediately that Michael was gone. “Still running,” she said. That was part of his charm. He was like a horse that was unbroken. He would never fully surrender to her. She would never stop trying to make him do so. Was she falling in love? Time would tell. She slipped into her spacious dressing room to prepare herself for work.

Rebecca was not a religious woman, but she was smart. In fact, on the issue of Michael’s direction in life, God half-agreed with her assessment. Before Michael Knight could be used, he would have to be broken. But no woman, including Rebecca, would be capable of the job. God himself would break his servant.

Chapter 41

Michael eased back in the chair. He did not plan on being employed at Cutler Sloan much longer.

“Take your time, hombre, take your time,” he said.

Ramon stood to his feet and began. He told him about the dough that Sonny had been making after he came out of the Marines and how Sonny had recruited him into the company. He told him about the drug money that explained his suddenly lavish lifestyle and about the deaths of Sonny, Kristal and Paulus Chin. He confessed it all—about Diego-Vega, Mack Stone and Jack Cutler.

“They’re all just a bunch of crooks, Michael. Crooks hiding in fancy clothes and houses. Crooks hiding behind multinational corporations and lawyers. I met guys in the brig in the Marines more honest than these guys.”

Ramon walked to the hotel window and looked out at the City.

“I wanted to talk to you at first because I believe that I was set-up to take the fall for the death of Kristal and Sonny Alvarado, in the event I ever tried to leave the organization. But now I know that the Lord had a greater purpose in this. He sent me here to help you.” Ramon turned and looked directly at Michael. “You have no idea the kind of danger you’re in. They will suck you in and trap you, just like they did me. If you try to bow out, then, I don’t have to tell you the rest. Just remember what I told you about Sonny.”

Michael was glad that he was seated because he felt that he was going to faint. How could this be? Cutler Sloan was one of the top law firms in the country.

“Why?” was all that he could say.

“Greed Michael. The money and the power are like drugs. The more you get, the more you want. Without Cindy and your father leading me to the Lord, I don’t know where I would be right now; probably still lying, cheating and *killing* for money and power.”

Michael breathed deeply. He had no clue on how to help Ramon, or himself. Ramon had touched on a good point though. Jeremiah Knight. That’s who they both needed. He started to tell Ramon to sit tight until he contacted his father when a sick feeling struck his gut like a fist.

“The documents,” he said. “Cutler made me shred twelve boxes of Great Neck documents.”

Ramon looked troubled. “What kind of documents?”

“They were related to a Great Neck acquisition of a Bahamian freight company that seemed to be losing a ton of money. The Bahamian company was owned by the redhead I was with earlier; actually her father.”

Ramon shook his head again.

“What is it? What do you know,” prodded Michael.

Ramon breathed in. “I don’t know much, but our company lawyer, the guy you met earlier—”

“The pool shark?”

“Yeah, Mack Stone. For some reason, he can’t stand these Cutler Sloan boys. He got blasted one night and called Cutler a cold-blooded murderer. He said that one of Cutler’s partners had gotten in with Cromwell’s daddy and started to leak information about what Cutler was doing with several of his overseas interests.”

Michael listened intently.

“Cutler was having forensic accountants fake the value of the assets on paper and then advising the company to sell the assets at fire sale prices. He would sell the assets to companies like Great Neck where he had silent interests.” Michael nodded slowly.

Ramon went on. “He would then charge the company a finder’s fee plus enormous legal fees to close these international transactions. He made money coming and going, and most of his clients thanked him for the tax benefits they received from these transactions. I think Stone hated Cutler because he couldn’t play in his league.”

“So what happened to the partner?” Michael asked.

“A skiing accident in Vail, Colorado, is what Stone said.”

Michael hung his head, overwhelmed. Ramon was describing Lloyd Murdock, the man whose office he had so gladly taken. They had rubbed out Murdock, but kept the evidence piled in his office. That didn’t make any sense. Why hadn’t Cutler just gotten rid of them? There were too many questions with too few answers. He would have to find out on his own. And what about Rebecca? If Cutler was bilking her father in this way, perhaps she was in danger too. He would have to find a way to warn her.

Michael jumped to his feet and grabbed his jacket. “I’m going to call Dad and get his advice. I’ll call you later when you arrive in Ozark Falls,” he said. “Right now, I’ve got to grab a shower and get to the office. I’ve got to figure out what’s going on and warn Rebecca.”

Ramon was disconcerted. “Don’t do anything stupid, little bro. These guys play for keeps.”

Michael tried to force a smile. “Hey, we just prayed, didn’t we?”

Michael rushed out and left Ramon standing alone.

Chapter 42

Michael hustled back to his apartment and changed for work. As usual, Ted was nowhere to be found. He seemed to still live in his father's apartment. Why did he even bother renting this place? Michael wondered.

Michael hailed a taxi and headed into the office. Brenda McCutcheon, Dickey Simpson's secretary, caught him on the way in.

"Mr. Simpson needs to see you immediately," she said.

They move fast, thought Michael. They weren't even going to wait until the two-fifteen meeting. Perhaps Cutler was too self-righteous to face him about Rebecca. He had sent in the B Team.

"I'll be right there," Michael said walking toward his office.

"Mr. Knight," McCutcheon said. "He needs you right *now*. I'll escort you."

Michael turned and followed the woman. Better sooner than later. He had already accepted his fate.

Dickey Simpson was seated behind his antique desk typing something into a high-tech laptop. He didn't immediately look up or acknowledge Michael. Ms. McCutcheon closed the door.

Michael stood still, watching him type furiously into the machine. He involuntarily cleared his throat. Simpson did not seem to notice or care. He kept up the frantic pace on the slim keypad. After a few more minutes, he stopped and sat back to read his words.

Michael still said nothing and was preparing himself to walk out. After everything Ramon had told him, his Wall Street law career was over before it started. Simpson

clicked around a few more times, seemingly revising his thoughts. Michael decided he would part amicably. He still needed to warn Rebecca. He waited some more.

Simpson made his final change and faced Michael who towered over his desk.

“You’ve got a lot of explaining to do and you’d better do it fast,” Simpson said. The little man had been a prosecutor and he loved asking questions. He peered at Michael with disdain. Michael looked back at him, incredulous. He certainly was not prepared to discuss his personal affairs with Dickey Simpson, Managing Partner or not. He hadn’t harmed the firm in any way. He and Rebecca were grownups.

Simpson glared at Michael, folded his hands and leaned forward on his desk.

“What did you do with the documents?” he demanded.

Michael had grown tired of his games. “What are you talking about?”

Simpson jumped to his feet and walked around the side of his desk. “I think you know what I’m talking about, Knight.”

Michael’s gut was beginning to turn into jelly. Of course he knew what Simpson was talking about. Simpson was trying to hold him responsible for the documents that Cutler had had him shred.

“Mr. Simpson, with all due respect—”

“Shut up!” the man barked. “Those documents were under an FBI subpoena. Who are you trying to protect over at Great Neck Shipping?”

Michael backed away. “No way; you crooks are not going to put that on me.”

Simpson walked toward him. “You little snot-nose fool. I knew you were full of it the first time that I laid eyes on you. I told Jack not to hire you. I could smell that something was wrong with you.”

Michael looked at the stodgy little man. He reminded him of a pit bull. “I don’t know what you’re trying to do, but you and I both know that Jack Cutler ordered me to destroy those documents.”

Simpson sneered. “Are you trying to tell me that a lawyer of Jack Cutler’s caliber told you, a glorified file clerk, to destroy evidence?” the man demanded. “Is that what you’re saying?” Simpson persisted. His face turned beet red.

Michael felt like the room was spinning. He felt as if he were descending into a miry pit. He fought back. “Brenda Lawson was there the whole time. She knew every detail of my assignment. She heard when Cutler told me to shred the documents.”

Simpson said, “Shut up while you’re ahead. Brenda Lawson was arrested this morning for embezzling two-hundred and fifty thousand dollars from one of our corporate trust accounts. Is that your witness, lover boy?”

Michael backed away and tripped over a hassock. Surely he was lying. But what did he really know about Brenda? Only that she seemed like an honest woman, a struggling single mother. Had they conspired to put the woman in jail? Michael shivered at the thought. Either way, he no longer had a witness. It was his word against Cutler’s. He was done.

Simpson wasn’t. He moved in for the kill. “I hope you enjoyed the twenty grand Lawson gave you. It was stolen from the same trust account that Lawson took the other money; Cromwell Industries.”

“That was a signing bonus—”

Simpson contorted his body in sick laughter. “You think rather highly of yourself for a hick thief,” he said. “And don’t worry, we’ve already warned Rebecca. Her father sent his jet for her this morning. You’ll never see her again.”

Michael leaned against Simpson’s wall for support waiting for the next domino to fall. Simpson obliged.

“Get out of here, Knight. And don’t you ever step foot in this firm again. You’re a disgrace. By the way, I wouldn’t crawl back under whatever hole you crawled out of just yet. The FBI wants to talk to you.”

Michael did not believe his ears. He felt like he was floating in air and watching the whole scene like a very bad movie. He was ruined. He took one last look at Simpson. “Why?” was the only word he could muster.

Simpson walked back to his desk and hit the intercom. “Send someone up here to escort Mr. Knight out of the building.”

Chapter 43

Cindy paced the halls of Ozark Falls Community Hospital. She alternated between praying to God and cursing the sickness that had brought her to this place. She couldn't stand to see her father deteriorate. He had dropped sixty pounds and his hair was gone from the chemotherapy.

He was holding on for dear life. In the room, Kathryn sat beside the bed and held his limp hand. Abby and Tara sat with her to pray and offer strength. David was in the parking lot outside pulling himself together.

Cindy's cell phone rang. It was Ramon.

"Hi babe, I just got back in town. Where are you?" he asked.

"I'm at the hospital," she said with tears in her voice. "I don't think Dad is going to make it through the night."

Ramon's heart raced. He had just been talking to Michael about Jeremiah. If the Reverend passed away without him being able to say goodbye, he would be devastated.

"Ramon, did you manage to get ahold of Michael in New York?" Cindy asked.

"Yes, I believe he was intending to call Jeremiah for some advice—"

"Well, everyone has been trying to track him down all night. He can't be found. I guess the New York high life is more important than his father."

"Hey, that's not fair," Ramon said. "Michael is going through a trial of his own right now. Don't judge."

"What do you mean he's going through a trial? What's going on up there?" Cindy asked, suddenly concerned for Michael.

"I'll explain when I get home. I'll meet you at the hospital."

###

Michael walked out of the Cutler Building for good. He did not look back. He would walk to his apartment, pack his things, and head back to Ozark Falls. Simpson had said that he should not leave town; that the FBI wanted to talk to him. Michael scoffed at the thought. According to Ramon, Dickey Simpson and his partners were just a sophisticated gang. They had stolen millions from their clients and from the public, yet it was Michael that the FBI supposedly wanted to speak to.

“What a joke,” he said. In a few hours he would be leaving town. The FBI would have to eat his dust.

###

Gavin Dunne had other ideas. He observed when Michael entered his apartment building and he followed him in. Once inside the elevator, Dunne struck up a conversation.

“Hey lad, shouldn’t you be at work at this time of day?” he said with a smile.

For the first time Michael noticed that he was wearing the expensive clothing that Cutler’s blood money had bought. He took off the jacket. He would have to throw the suit in the garbage.

“That’s a nice suit,” said Dunne. “It looks like a Canali . . . or Armani or something. I can never get those I-talian guys straight,” he laughed. “But they sure make nice suits,”

Michael nodded slightly; glad to see that the elevator was on his floor. He stepped into the hallway. Dunne stopped the door from closing with his foot.

“Hey Michael, you mind if I have few minutes with you.”

Michael turned and faced him. “How do you know my name?”

“Well Mike; if you don’t mind me calling you Mike, there’s some things that I know and some things that I don’t know. I’ll make you a deal. I’m going to tell you some things that I know. If you were smart and I hear that you’re about as smart as they come, you would then tell me some things that I don’t know.”

Michael could see where he was headed. “I don’t have to talk to you without a lawyer.”

“I guess they been teaching you the standard stuff in that fancy pants law firm that you work for.”

“If you know so much, you would know that was in the past tense, Sherlock.”

“Good for you son. You really are *smart*. Some lawyers in that firm and some of its clients seem to wind up dead on a regular basis. You know anything about that?”

Michael hung his head under the weight of his situation. How did he arrive at this place? Engulfed in his own personal failure, kicked out of his dream, and being questioned by the authorities.

“Mr. Whoever You Are, if you’ve got no further questions and you’re not arresting me, I’m going inside. I’ve got lots to do.”

“I’m sure you do hotshot. Give Ramon Sanchez my regards.”

Michael slipped his key in the lock. This guy just didn’t give up.

“We know you’ve been taking contraband money from Sanchez.”

Michael paused.

“And a nice little payday from Brenda Lawson, too. We know that Sanchez was working with Lawson on that case where one of your lawyers jumped out of a window.”

Michael wished the man would just shut up and go away. He would not.

“We subpoenaed what was left of Lloyd Murdock’s records as part of our investigation. There was enough there to put Sanchez and everyone involved in those deals behind bars for a long time.”

“All of a sudden you show up and the documents are *accidentally* shredded. Give me a break. Cromwell may have cut *you* some slack on the embezzlement but my boys won’t be as friendly about the missing docs, if you know what I mean.”

Michael had heard enough. He burst into the apartment and slammed the door behind him.

Out in the hallway Gavin Dunne leaned into the crack of the door. “Don’t leave town anytime soon.”

Chapter 44

Michael tore off his clothes and threw them in the garbage. He sat on the edge of his bed in disbelief. It seemed that his life had unraveled in less than twenty-four hours. He thought of Abby and his broken vow. He thought of Rebecca and the fact that he would never see her again. Then he felt shame and guilt for even wanting to see her again.

The telephone gave a loud ring that startled him. He was in no mood to speak with anyone. He let the answering machine pick up. It was Ted.

“Michael, pick up if you’re there. Pick up. I heard the whole thing, and I’m not buying any of it. You should have come to me. You broke one of the biggest rules of the game ever—never, and I mean never fool around with the boss’ girlfriend.” Ted paused. Michael sat up straight. Ted continued.

“There was no way Cutler was going to make a rookie like you take away his girl. They were dating long before you ever came on the scene.”

Michael grabbed the telephone from off the hook. “You lie.”

“Michael, you can’t play in this game if you won’t obey the rules. Who brought you to Justine’s? Who introduced you to Rebecca? You must have thought you were falling in love.” Ted laughed. Michael was silent.

“Michael, girls like Rebecca are interested in two things; power and moolah. In two weeks she wouldn’t know your name. Get over it dude. I’ve *dated* the girl several times myself—but not on the boss’ clock.”

Michael slammed down the telephone and wept. The telephone beeped a busy signal but Michael didn’t hear it. He wept for his stupidity and for his betrayal. He wept for rejecting what was good and wholesome and real, for the slick, the evil and the fake.

He fell to his knees and cried out to God for forgiveness. He'd been away, it seemed, for so long but now the struggle was over. He would come home to his Father and confess all of his sins.

He longed to walk again in the fellowship of God's presence, to feel His wind at his back. He was so tired; so tired of running. He cried out to God with all of his heart for healing and restoration.

“Oh God, I've sinned against you and gone my own way. I've brought shame on your name and upon others and myself. I ask for your forgiveness, your healing and deliverance. Father, only you can close doors that no man can open or open doors that no man can close. I pray that you deliver me from this situation and help me to walk again in newness of life. Deliver me, oh God, and I will serve you all the days of my life.”

Suddenly he was back on that football field at Ozark College, on his knees in the end zone. The voice of God was crystal clear, almost audible in its quality. “Before I made you in the womb I knew you and I have called you to preach to thousands and to thousands times ten thousands.”

Michael bowed his head in the presence of God.

“Yes, Lord,” he said.

Chapter 45

Michael got up off his knees a changed man. He felt as if a ten-ton boulder had been rolled from his shoulder. The problems were still there and they would all have to be dealt with, but he felt strong. He felt like his life was beginning again.

He would go home, confess his failures to Abby and to his parents; especially Jeremiah, and begin the work of winning back their trust. He would leave Jack Cutler, Dickey Simpson and the FBI to God.

He packed a light bag and exited the apartment. He would give the folks a surprise visit.

###

“Cutler Sloan,” said the pleasant voice on the other side of the telephone.

Cindy composed herself. “May I speak with Michael Knight,” she said.

“Please hold while I check the line,” the woman said.

Cindy waited. After two or three minutes it seemed as if the receptionist would never return to the telephone. What is Michael doing, briefing the president? No one is this hard to get on the telephone.

The wait continued a while longer and then the pleasant voice returned. “I apologize for keeping you waiting, ma’am, I’m new. Michael Knight is no longer with this firm.”

“Since when?” Cindy asked, dumbfounded.

“I can’t be certain, ma’am. As I told you, I’m new.”

Cindy hung up the telephone. This is what Ramon had meant when he said that Michael was having a bad time in New York. Michael was a brilliant student. What happened?

Cindy crinkled her eyebrows and placed her cell phone back in her bag. She needed a change of scenery. Walking to the parking lot, she spied her car sitting idle. “I’ll listen to a few tunes,” she said under her breath. She sat in the vehicle and switched on the key. In short order she was fast asleep.

###

A few hours later Ramon arrived at the hospital. Cindy saw him coming down the hallway and ran toward him. When they embraced she began to cry. She didn’t have any words in her vocabulary at that moment to explain her feelings.

Jeremiah looked terrible. Cindy didn’t believe he would make it through the night. “Where is Michael?” she asked Ramon. He looked away for an instant.

“Right where I left him,” he said. He didn’t want to compound a bad situation with more bad news. This was definitely *not* the time to discuss the dilemma Michael was in. He would explain all of that later.

“I called his office earlier, Ramon,” Cindy said, through tears. “They said he had been fired.” Her eyes were searching for answers. Ramon’s eyes were shifting.

“He left my hotel room on the way to the office this morning. I don’t know—”

“Why was he leaving from *your* hotel room,” Cindy said, sensing something peculiar about Ramon’s story.

“He was working on a big project and had to be extra early. The time he spent with me was the only chance we had to see each other. I can’t tell you what happened once he got to the office though.”

“Well I just told you; he got canned and no one in his family knows where he is. His father is . . .” Cindy began to cry again. Ramon put his arms around her.

“It’s going to be alright, babe,” he said. He wished that he could believe his own words.

###

Gavin Dunne permitted Ramon to board the flight back to Kansas City. Six hours later he permitted Michael to also board a flight to the same destination. He was in no rush. He was certain that the two were somehow involved in the Great Neck Shipping criminal enterprise. He just wasn’t yet sure to what extent.

Intelligence had confirmed that Sanchez was married to Knight’s sister. All in the family. Dunne smirked. Sanchez had been buying expensive toys for more than a year. He’d bumped Sonny Alvarado out of the way and was making way for the brother-in-law. Someone had to take over his filthy job.

The brother-in-law was ambitious. He had tried to heist twenty grand right under his employer’s nose. He supposedly gave the rest of the money back and the firm had not pressed charges. Hush, hush. That’s how crooks dealt with their own kind.

The FBI would be a different story. If it could be proven that he’d acted like a cowboy and destroyed evidence under a federal subpoena to protect his partner, Sanchez, Dunne would see to it that he got thirty years.

Chapter 46

Michael's plane touched down at Kansas City International Airport. The small airport and the lack of crowds was a welcome sight. The place had never looked so good before. He picked up his pace. He was glad to be back on familiar ground. He could take on whatever would come from here. This was Michael Knight territory.

Michael grabbed a taxi and settled in for the ride. He was looking forward to the green fields of Ozark falls. He thought of Abby. He both hungered and dreaded to see her. How could he tell her *everything*? This would certainly be the end.

But he had been living a lie and he was tired of it. From this day forward he would tell the truth, no matter what the cost. He had allowed himself to drift too far away from God. It was God who he would have to trust with Abby. Their love would survive this test. God was able.

The car pulled into the Knight residence and Michael got out of the car. The place looked empty. He opened the door and walked throughout the house. Nobody home. He picked up the phone to call Abby when Lincoln Snow walked through the front door.

"Michael?" Lincoln said.

"Hey there, Mr. Snow," Michael said, actually glad to see him. "The place is deserted. Where's Abby?"

Lincoln stared at Michael for a few seconds. His face was white. His eyes were shifty. Michael caught the disconcerted look. Now he was feeling nervous.

"Mr. Snow, is something going on that I should know about?"

Lincoln looked away. Michael walked up to him.

“Mr. Snow, I’m asking you a question? What’s going on that you’re not telling me about?” He thought for a second. Of course, Todd and Abby! Michael backed down.

After his failure in New York, he deserved whatever he got. He approached Lincoln.

“I guess Abby has moved on from me, sir,” he said.

Lincoln shook his head “no.” He walked over to Michael and placed his hand on his shoulder. “Your father is dead, Michael. He passed an hour ago at Ozark Community. Abby is with your mother. David sent me to get some things—”

Michael backed away from the man in horror. This could not be happening. He choked for air. How? Why? He burst past Lincoln and jumped into Harriet. The old truck would not start. He pounded on the steering wheel and flipped the ignition once again. This time the faithful servant fired right up.

Michael drove through the town oblivious to everything around him. Lincoln trailed behind to keep an eye on him. When he arrived at the hospital room, the truth began to hit him. Church members, pastors, friends and relatives lined the hallways. They all looked spooked to see him barreling down the hall. At the doorway of his dad’s room, some distant family members were crying.

Michael pushed his way into the room. Kathryn, David and Cindy were surrounding Jeremiah. They looked up, saw his face and came toward him. Michael looked at the drawn, sickly remains of the robust man who had been his father. He fell down at his father’s feet and began to weep.

Kathryn, Cindy and David tried to console him somehow, through their own grief. Abby wept quietly in the corner of the room. Someone closed the door to the room.

Michael cried from deep down in his soul. He'd never felt searing pain as this. The things that he was facing didn't even compare.

He had surrendered to the Lord. He would preach the Gospel as Jeremiah had wished. But he would never know. They would never speak again. Jeremiah had died believing him to be in rebellion. Michael stayed at his father's feet and bawled.

###

Jeremiah Knight was absent from the body but present with the Lord. He had died a happy man, believing in the promises of God. Believing that one day, his youngest son would lead *millions* to his Lord.

###

It would be many hours before Michael would leave the room where his father died. He felt as if something inside had died with him.

Chapter 47

Jeremiah's funeral was the best attended in the history of Ozark Falls. It seemed as if every resident of the County was present. David delivered a powerful message called "A Life Well-Lived." Many came to know the Lord that day. Michael sat through the entire ceremony shell-shocked in sunshades.

He squeezed Kathryn's hand on the left and Abby's on the right. He played the scene at Ramon and Cindy's wedding over and over in his head; his quick exit from town without even saying goodbye to his mom or dad. He let the tears flow down his cheeks. He would never forgive himself.

At the end of the day, he lay in his old bed. Ramon and Cindy were staying over, mostly for Kathryn. He had thrown David out much earlier. He preferred to wallow in his guilt. Todd had been by and somehow Ted had gotten the news and his telephone number. Michael told Ramon to take a message. The thought of Ted and his misguided world made him feel worse. He put up a prayer for him; perhaps one day he would meet a real Christian who would lead him instead of following.

Ted was right about one thing. It was Danforth rule number 3—it's all about *who* you know. Michael thought about his father now in the presence of his heavenly Father. It was all about *who* you know. "Score one more for the master," he said and drifted off to sleep.

###

Gavin Dunne didn't believe in lucky breaks. Frankly, that luck of the Irish stuff made him sick. What he believed in was good detective work, and his team had scored big. His Kansas City counterpart had found a neighbor who had seen Kristal Alvarado

three days before her disappearance. The woman was an illegal immigrant who had kept quiet for fear of being dragged into the mess and deported.

Agent Quinn Bledsoe had convinced the woman that now that her identity and legal status were known, it was far better for her to cooperate with the authorities. The FBI had a way of convincing people to cooperate. The woman told Bledsoe that she had been cleaning the Alvarado's ritzy house when she saw a man who was not Mr. Alvarado enter the house and sit down in the living room. The woman quietly hid herself in a linen closet.

Approximately fifteen minutes later Kristal Alvarado came home and it sounded like she began to go up the stairs. The noise on the stairs suddenly stopped. She peeped through a crack in the closet. The man was standing and talking to Kristal who was on the stairs out of her sight. The man pointed a gun toward Kristal and led her down to the basement, passing right in front of where she hid in the closet. Within five minutes another man joined the first in the basement. The men then left the premises.

The frightened woman had called for her ride, left the Alvarado house and never returned. Kristal Alvarado had not been in a hiking accident in Costa Rica. She had probably never been there. She had been murdered in cold blood in her own home.

The part of the story that made Dunne shiver with delight was the description of the killer: Hispanic male, five feet eleven, approximately two hundred pounds, with dark hair. His fingerprints were still in the apartment. Ramon Sanchez was his man.

###

Kathryn and Cindy were asleep in Kathryn's bed. Abby crept upstairs to check on Michael. She was glad that Michael was finally getting some sleep too. She felt his pain

deeply. She wanted to make up and put the past behind them. Of course she would move to New York or anywhere else he wanted. The important part was that they would be together. Michael would need her now. She knew that he was blaming himself for not saying goodbye.

Ramon was watching television in the den. She padded down the stairs and joined him. They made small talk and the telephone rang. Abby had inherited the job of telephone traffic cop.

“Hello,” she said feeling a bit exhausted.

“Hello, may I speak with Michael please?” the voice said.

Abby had never heard *this* voice before. She felt the hairs stand up in the back of her neck.

“And who may I say is calling?” she inquired.

“Oh forgive me, tell him it’s Rebecca, Rebecca Cromwell.”

Chapter 48

Quinn Bledsoe got back to his office late that evening. He had made a three-hour run across the plain cow country between Kansas City and Wichita, Kansas. He sat behind his desk and shuffled through the day's mail. The office was pretty empty. It was past ten o'clock at night.

His partner, Agent Carly Jefferson walked into his office.

"I've got a surprise for you," she said.

"Hit me."

"You've got it. The warrant for Ramon Sanchez's arrest was handed down today. Let's get him," she said. Bledsoe smiled. His old boss, Gavin Dunne was going to be proud.

"Nice job, Carly," he said. "Let's not waste any time."

###

Ramon breathed in. He had an uneasy feeling that Abby was talking to a certain rich, New York redhead. He tried to pretend that he couldn't hear the conversation.

"Michael's asleep, Ms. Cromwell. Maybe you can call back tomorrow," Abby said.

"That would be fine," said Rebecca. "And who am I speaking with?" she asked.

"This is Abby Snow, a friend of the family."

"Oh hello, Abby, I've heard a lot about you. You're Michael's former . . . you're the woman he was dating before we met."

Abby rose to her feet and walked out of the den. Michael was grieved over his father. But there was something materially *different* about the man who had returned from New

York a few days ago. She couldn't put her finger on it, but she suspected that somewhere behind the change lay this woman. In time, she would address it with Michael.

She continued, "Oh no, Ms. Cromwell, I'm not just the woman Michael *was dating*. I'm his *current* fiancé. He told me you might be calling. I'll make sure that he gets your message in the morning."

"That would be fine. I know that he doesn't like to have his sleep disturbed. And congratulations, he didn't mention the engagement to me."

"We've decided to keep it low key; just a small and intimate country wedding. Good night Ms. Cromwell."

Ramon stared stone-faced at the television as Abby reentered the den. He could feel the frost. He wouldn't want to be Michael Knight in the morning.

###

Outside the Knight's residence, Agent Jefferson put the cruiser in park. "You don't think we're going to see any action from this perp do you?" she said.

Bledsoe shrugged. "I doubt it. He's got a pregnant wife that's in there. He supposedly found religion a while back and now he's the Pope. Let's take him down."

The officers approached the door and gave a heavy knock. Abby was drifting off to sleep. Ramon looked through the peephole and opened the door.

"Ramon Sanchez?" said Quinn Bledsoe.

"That's me," said Ramon, panicked.

"We have a warrant for your arrest Mr. Sanchez. You have the right to remain silent—"

Ramon looked down at the ground. "What am I being charged for?"

“For first degree murder, tough guy. Remember Kristal Alvarado?”

Across the room, Abby stood at the opening of the den staring at the scene in disbelief. The officers continued to read Ramon his rights. They then placed hard steel handcuffs on him and began to lead him out of the house. Abby stared in horror.

“I’m innocent,” said Ramon.

###

Abby bounded up the stairs and woke Michael. “Two officers are downstairs arresting Ramon,” she said frantically.

Michael tried to get his wits about him. “What?”

“It’s Ramon, Michael. They are arresting him for the murder of Kristal Alvarado. You remember the girl who disappeared a few months ago. How—”

“Listen to me. Take care of Cindy. I’ll explain to you later, but Ramon is innocent. This is a big setup. Some powerful people are using him as a scapegoat. I have got to get down there and help him.”

Michael ran down the stairs. Carly Jefferson backed the cruiser out of the Knights’ driveway. Michael jumped into Harriet. He had to find a way to help Ramon.

Chapter 49

The flashing lights through the window woke Cindy. She arose and walked toward the den to ask Ramon what was going on. Abby greeted her in the hallway.

“Cindy, I want you to take it easy for a minute,” Abby said.

Cindy looked perplexed. “OK.”

“Ramon has been arrested.”

“What! What are you talking about Abby?”

“Two officers just took him away.”

“For what?”

“For the murder of Kristal Alvarado.”

Cindy held onto her belly. She felt weak, on the verge of fainting. Abby grabbed her arm and helped her steady herself.

“Michael went after them. He is going to see if he can find some help for Ramon.”

Cindy turned and headed back to Kathryn’s bedroom. She put on street clothes and told Abby to do the same.

“We’re going for a ride Abby. I appreciate what Michael is doing, but there is only one man in this county that can help Ramon. We need to go see him, right now.”

###

Raul Diego-Vega was a night owl. It was in his blood. He could go for days without many hours of sleep. His lawyer, Mack Stone, had been spending a few days in town and, as usual, they were at the billiards table when Diego-Vega received the buzz.

“It’s Cindy Sanchez and an Abigail Snow, sir,” the voice said.

Diego-Vega had not expected the visit. He'd not yet decided whether he would hang Ramon out to dry. Ramon was of little use to him. He'd come in as the aggressive tough soldier. Something happened and he'd gotten soft. He was Sonny Alvarado all over again.

First they came in with a lot of promise. Soon they would be selling you out to your enemies. Diego-Vega would never take that chance. Ramon's brother-in-law had also caused some trouble among the big boys in New York and they were not happy about it. Ramon Sanchez was becoming more trouble than he was worth.

Diego-Vega welcomed Cindy and Abby. Mack Stone smiled warmly and shook their hands. Diego-Vega looked at Cindy and said, "You can speak freely here. Mr. Stone is my attorney."

"Ramon was arrested tonight for the murder of Kristal Alvarado. Sir, you know that Ramon could never do anything—"

"Mrs. Sanchez, this is a criminal matter; not the kind of job-related difficulty that we can use our company attorneys for. Mr. Stone handles corporate business matters. While I agree that Ramon is *probably* innocent, I am not at liberty to intervene. We must let justice take its course."

Cindy looked at the man for whom Ramon had worked so hard. Now he was refusing to help Ramon when he really needed it. She would not beg him. She grabbed Abby to go and shot an icy, disapproving look at Stone.

The look pierced him to his heart. He knew what it meant. She was calling him the flunky and coward that he was to his face. And she was right. He was Raul Diego-Vega's well-paid flunky. What she didn't know and what he couldn't tell her was that he'd long

tired of being pushed around and was quietly planning his own departure—or better put, his vanishing into thin air.

He stared back at Cindy. I hear you loud and clear Cindy. I know who I am. But your husband chose to run with wolves, and I'm no hero.

Diego-Vega dismissed the women and then verbally dismissed Ramon. There were one thousand Ramons ready, willing and able to take his place. There were more important matters to discuss.

He hailed Stone back toward the billiard room. Stone followed, but then motioned for Diego-Vega to go on without him. He walked briskly toward the departing women. He arrived at the front of the house just as they were headed toward Cindy's car. He called Cindy's name and she turned to see who was calling.

Stone walked toward her. "May I have a minute?"

Cindy nodded to Abby to head to the car and Abby walked away. "What do you want, Mack? In case you've forgotten, Ramon is in custody and your boss won't even lift a finger," she said, eyes flashing.

Stone looked deeply into her pain-drenched eyes and, in that instant, truly admired her courage. He'd been with so many empty and vapid women, that he didn't know what a real one looked like. He could love this woman. But this was not his time and she was not his woman.

"Listen, Ramon is going to need some serious legal representation." He handed her a business card. "I want you to contact Charlie Caruthers at this number. He's the number one criminal defense attorney in this area and he owes me some major favors. I'll work

with him behind the scenes to help Ramon, but you have to keep it quiet. I'll let him know you're coming."

Cindy took the card and blushed. Perhaps he wasn't so bad after all. "Thank you Mack," she said, and reached up and kissed his cheek.

He couldn't help smiling; having received his first and last kiss from the woman he believed he had loved at first sight.

Chapter 50

Michael's drive to the county jail had been fruitless. Figuring that he was doing more harm than good, he'd gone home defeated. He did, however, contact Todd's dad who was trying to connect Ramon with the family lawyer. Given the seriousness of the charge, Ramon would be locked up without bail.

With Ramon's incarceration, time seemed to stand still. If a case of circumstantial evidence could be made, Ramon would spend the rest of his days behind bars. Elsie suggested that the family convene a prayer meeting at Morningside Church to seek God together on Ramon's behalf. David opened the sanctuary and everyone met there.

Michael arrived and found David, Tara, Abby, Elsie, Kathryn and Todd talking quietly. Todd filled them in on what his dad's lawyer was saying. Cindy had also told Abby that Ramon was not doing so well. Michael suggested that the family join hands in a circle and pray in turn.

Michael led the prayer. "Father in heaven, we thank you for this opportunity to come together as a family. You see and know all things. You know that Ramon is innocent of these charges. Father, we pray that *you* be his defense; that you deliver him from these evil circumstances."

The family prayed, it seemed, for hours and David suggested they commence a fast to seek the Lord for seven days. Everyone agreed, wiped their tears and headed home.

David called Michael into his office. Dad asked me to tell you that he loved you and he was going to petition the Lord to watch you preach just once." Michael hung his head.

“Dad never gave up on you Michael and he never stopped loving you. You’ve got to let this thing go or it will ruin your life. You’ve got to forgive yourself and move on. It was not your fault Michael, let it go.”

Michael nodded and embraced David. “I’m working on it.”

“Hey, I never filled the youth pastor position. I guess it was just yours.”

“I don’t know David. I think I’d like to find something at First Baptist. I think that by serving in the same church where Dad gave so much of his life would help me spend some more time with him.”

David nodded. “Well, Ed Monroe is the senior guy over there now. He’s a good man. I’m certain he could find a place for Jeremiah’s Knight’s long lost preacher boy.”

Michael laughed. It felt good to reconcile with the family. He went back into the main sanctuary and found Abby sitting in a pew. He slid beside her and turned so that he could look her in the face.

“Abby, there’s some things that I have to talk to you about—”

“I know, Michael. I know all about her.” Michael was startled. “I spoke to her on the telephone.” Michael’s eyes drifted away. “And so I don’t need all of the sordid details. It’s not necessary Michael. After everything that’s happened, I suppose that I’m willing to accept my part in it, to move on and forgive. Life is too precious Michael. We have no time to waste,” she said, tears welling in her eyes.

Michael started to respond but she motioned him to stop.

“Let me finish Michael, I think I have enough strength to get this out just once. So the question that I’m asking you Michael is, in light of whatever you experienced in New York, am I wasting my time?”

Michael got down on his knees in front of Abby. He wiped the tears that were streaming down her face. His own tears flowed freely.

“Abigail Marie Snow, I have loved you since kindergarten. The first time I saw you, you were wearing snow boots and a big red scarf that seemed bigger than your whole body. When they peeled you out of the cocoon your hair was everywhere. I’ve been in love with you ever since. I want to pick up where we left off. You’re the only woman I will ever love. Again, will you marry me?”

They both laughed, and cried, simultaneously. They were old friends again. They embraced and found Harriet.

David called Tara. “Looks like there’s going to be another wedding soon,” he said.

Chapter 51

The day came for Ramon's arraignment. Elsie and her prayer warriors at Morningside Church had been on the prayer chain for twenty-four hours leading up to the hearing where Ramon would make a court appearance and enter his plea.

The entire family and the many members of the church were planning to be there to support Ramon. Cindy had been living with Michael and Kathryn and they got ready to make an early departure. The courtroom would be standing room only.

Michael made coffee and Kathryn helped to steady Cindy. The two women kissed and embraced. They were both grieving for their spouses. Michael brought in coffee and the three of them held hands. Kathryn gave him their secret squeeze. He hugged and kissed his mother and sister.

"Our God is bigger than this circumstance," he said.

The three of them closed the front door and headed toward Kathryn's car. Standing beside the car was a large carton box about two feet wide. It almost reached the height of the hood. There was a packing slip but Michael didn't recognize the carrier.

It looked legitimate enough, so Michael opened the box. He let out a gasp and pulled back. Kathryn instinctively stepped in front of Cindy.

"What is it?" She said. Michael took out a handful of documents and papers from the box's seemingly endless supply. There was a sticky note on the top document. "Just an advanced birthday gift for little Pedro," is all it said.

Kathryn, still reeling from all that had happened, asked Michael again.

"*What is it Michael?*" she insisted. Michael turned to the ladies and laughed.

“God just shipped us Ramon’s deliverance,” Michael said.

###

Mack Stone was never the sentimental type. If anyone cared to ask he would openly admit he was always in it for the money. Ramon had simply made the same mistake, with one major difference —no exit strategy. Nevertheless, he didn’t deserve the death penalty. Cindy didn’t deserve that either.

He pulled his skiff into the private island he had purchased off the coast of South America. He would lay low for a year or two and plot out his life. Maybe he would fall in love. He docked the boat and walked back to his discreet Italian-style villa. He was no longer Diego-Vega’s puppet lawyer. The evidence delivered to the Knight household would bring him and his New York cronies to their knees.

Jack Cutler would land the hardest. They had pushed him around for the last time.

###

Michael, Kathryn and Cindy headed for the District Attorney’s office and asked for Denny Bruce, the prosecutor in charge of Ramon’s case. They received the usual speech about Bruce’s schedule of cases that morning.

Michael leaned into the receptionist. “Listen, tell Mr. Bruce that I have a box full of evidence that will exonerate an innocent man and hand him victory in what will be the largest and most publicized prosecution this county has ever seen.”

Michael waited while the flustered woman relayed the message, word for word. She looked up at Michael through her thick glasses.

“Mr. Bruce will be right out to see you.”

###

The celebration at Morningside Church raged into the evening. They opened the doors wide and music could be heard in the streets:

Our God is an awesome God

He reigns from heaven above

With wisdom, power and love

Our God is an awesome God!

The people held hands and worshipped the God who was real, the God who still knew how to deliver His people. David preached and Michael gave testimony. Ramon hugged Cindy and Elsie tight. He could not stop saying the words, “Thank you, Lord.” Michael stepped outside the portable building and looked across the football field where he’d played his final college game. It seemed so long ago.

Todd came outside and stood beside him. “I still have a key to the gym; I can turn on the lights.”

Michael gave him a puzzled look.

“Come on Jerry Rice; let’s see if you still got some game.”

“Still got game? I’m not the one who took over my parents’ restaurant chain, Pudgy.”

“You’re not exactly in game form yourself, Captain. Let’s see your stuff.”

Michael laughed. He and Todd had been competing like this their whole lives. He would never back down from a challenge.

Todd went inside and turned on the lights. The men took to the field and set up the play. Michael could see the imaginary players assigned to defend him on the other side. There were thirty seconds left. It was a must score for Ozark Falls.

Todd growled out the call. Michael broke into a dead run. Todd dropped back and cocked his arm for the throw. Michael spun past the imaginary defender and turned. Just like clockwork, Todd's pass spiraled beautifully through the air. Michael dove for the ball, caught it and broke the plane of the end zone.

Clutching the ball, he rolled onto his knees laughing out loud. In the distance Todd whooped and jumped. Abby, Kathryn and a bunch of people had come out of the church to watch and they were cheering too. Michael looked into the beautiful starry sky.

He was finally home.

Epilogue

Michael and Abby sat across the desk from Edward Monroe, the new senior pastor of First Baptist Church of Ozark Falls. The couple had been married by David and commissioned together for ministry.

Ed was a serious man who had worked with Jeremiah for twenty years and was groomed for succession. The church accepted him readily as their new leader. Michael was also glad that he was in charge. There was much that he could learn from Ed. He'd known him since he was a toddler.

Ed wanted to make his position clear from the start. He was willing to give Michael a shot at a junior pastor position within the church. However, Michael had to understand that the name recognition would not buy Michael anything. Sure, there would be some transfer of affinity from *some members* of the congregation, but Michael had to be certain that he didn't allow that to go to his head.

"The Bible calls that pride," Pastor Monroe warned. Before a position could be offered, he wanted Michael to know that he would have to work hard like any other pastor. That was the first rule of the ministry game.

Michael squeezed Abby's hand and mentally put his "Grasshopper" hat back on. The school of life was once again in session. He'd learned a lot about himself, but there would be many more challenges in this new frontier. He looked at Abby. She smiled and nodded that she was ready to go. Michael smiled back and then stuck out his hand to Ed. Here we go again, he said to himself.