

Third Movement

Contemplative, but intense



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“With someone?”

“No. Alone.”

“Dressed?”

“Yes. I think so, yes.”

“What was she doing?”

“I think -” Kelden closed his eyes. “Yes . . . she was leaning against the wall, running her hands over her body.”

“Did you approach her?”

Careful, *thought Kelden.* Just as you rehearsed it. Don't get trapped. . . .

Kelden Scott

Chapter 1

Kelden found his way home some time early Sunday morning. He collapsed onto his couch and slept restlessly through the day, waking several times to the echo of a scream ringing in his ears. More than once he reached for his phone, but whom could he call? Not Laurie – God, he didn't even know if she was alive! The police? The last thing he wanted was their attention. Jim Oakes? What would he say? “Excuse me, but did you guys gang rape Laurie Pachis last night?” And he couldn't call the people he most desperately needed to talk to – Paige, David, Tony. So he huddled in a corner of his couch, eyes squeezed against the daylight through the curtains, getting up only when his stomach insisted on expelling something no longer there. And when someone finally tried calling him, he didn't answer.

Darkness brought relief from his headache, but more clarity of thought. Some of the previous night he would probably never recover, including parts of his attack on Laurie. Certain things, though, would haunt him forever – the terror in her screams, the desperation in her struggles, the tortured animal in her eyes. He stayed hunched on the couch, staring into the darkening air, occasionally shuddering. By now, the police had to know he'd been there; he expected a knock on his door at any moment. He wanted to get up and fix himself a joint, but the memory of what he'd already done while high and the thought of the police finding him stoned kept him pinned to the cushions, trembling. But he kept seeing Laurie's eyes and hearing her screams. So, finally, at about nine, he gave in. He didn't

enjoy it.

Nightmares plagued his sleep again, and he awoke early. He showered and dressed slowly, knowing he'd have to face questions today. He had to come up with a story. The incident had lost its immediate horror, and he remembered now that the fear in Laurie's eyes had been devoid of recognition. He felt a flutter of hope, then guilt. How could he think of himself, when Laurie was God-knew-where, suffering God-knew-what? But survival is strong, and when he left, forty-five minutes early, he looked as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened over the weekend.

He bought a copy of the *Fell Park Register* on the way to work. The incident had made the front page, below the fold, under "23 Arrested in Brutal Party Assault". Laurie was, of course, not identified. Neither were the men, since they couldn't be formally charged over the weekend. But the rest of the details were there, from the drugs to the attack. Most of those arrested had only been witnesses and would likely be charged with simple drug possession. Eleven, however, would certainly be charged with assault, and six with rape. And one would likely be charged with attempted murder as well - he had been trying to silence her by strangling her when the police arrived. Authorities were compiling a list of all who had been at the party and would begin interviewing them today. Meanwhile, the victim had been hospitalized in critical condition with cuts, bruises, torn ligaments, a mild concussion, and a bruised trachea.

Kelden set the paper aside, shaken. He'd told himself that what he'd done to Laurie couldn't possibly have been as bad as what had happened afterwards - which, technically, was true. But if she hadn't successfully fought him off, would the six have been seven? And would any of them have even been there at all had it not been for him?

He glanced at the dashboard clock. He had less than fifteen minutes in which to be at his terminal. He took several deep breaths, stepped out of the Spyder, closed the door firmly, and strode into the maelstrom.

AgriState was in an uproar. Although no identifying details had been published, those who hadn't been arrested had spoken to friends and coworkers, and word had spread quickly. Social media had already identified the party as an AgriState party. In the few minutes it took to travel from the employee entrance to the computer room, Kelden heard five different low-voiced conversations and was questioned three times by people who'd heard he was there or who had been there themselves but had left early. He answered carefully, questioning in return. By the time he reached his station, he'd learned that two of the rape suspects, as well as half those arrested for possession, had highly visible positions as tellers or customer service representatives at the main bank or one of the branch facilities. The other four arrested for rape had been from the computer room. Jim Oakes was the one who had been strangling Laurie and wasn't expected to return to his position in the near future – if ever.

Kelden had little time to worry or keep track of gossip as the remaining computer staff scrambled to cover the work of their missing associates, but he did learn by mid-morning that AgriState had begun receiving calls from the concerned and curious. Management had quickly abandoned a policy of ignorance and was now assuring everyone that they were investigating with an eye toward appropriate discipline and that AgriState services would remain unaffected. Meanwhile, they prepared for an onslaught.

By noon, Kelden was concerned only with whether Nicolette Bahan or the police would be calling him first. It turned out to be a tie. As he ate a sandwich in his cubicle, Nicolette brought him word that he was to report to the police station as soon as he could get away, then asked him to stop and see her afterward, no matter how long it took – she'd be working late that night. She looked around the computer room at the empty stations, then left with a sigh and a shake of her head. Kelden quickly packed up his lunch scraps and slipped out.

He was welcomed politely at the Fell Park Law and

Justice Center and shown to a small, private inner room devoid of any furnishings save a table and a few chairs. Here he was introduced to Detective Ian Fairchilde, a small, thin man with a neat mustache and a hint of an Australian accent, and Detective Marcus Petrusko, a tall, black man who looked and carried himself like a football player. They were neither overtly hostile nor overly friendly, making it clear without stating that while they intended to conduct this session cordially, they would be doing their jobs thoroughly and efficiently. They shook hands with Kelden, and Fairchilde indicated a chair on one side of the table. As he and his partner sat on the other side, he asked, "Coffee?"

Kelden nodded. "Please."

As the officer who'd escorted Kelden to the room vanished, Fairchilde said, pleasantly, "Let's get some basic information down, yes? Full name?"

"Kelden Alistair Scott." He glanced at Petrusko, who was taking notes.

"You usually go by 'Kelden'?" Fairchilde continued.

Kelden nodded again. "Or 'Kel'."

"Okay. Kelden. Address?"

"1523 North Pine, Apartment 'D'."

"How long have you lived there?"

"About a month and a half."

"Where were you before that?"

"1903 Brisbane."

"For -?"

"About two months. Before that, I was at 2302½ Gridley for about 2½ months, and before that I was in an apartment in the Van Duyn Building downtown here for about three weeks, and before that I was at 7323 Osage in Chicago for about two years. How far back do you need?"

"That's good. You move around quite a bit."

Kelden just nodded. "Yeah."

"How long have you been at AgriState?"

"Since June 17."

"In the computer room the whole time?"

"Yes."

"And what did you do in Chicago?"

"Programmer-analyst for Summit Mutual."

Detective Fairchilde waited while the officer returned to the room with Kelden's coffee. After the door closed again, he asked, "Are you married?"

"Divorced. That's why I left Chicago."

Fairchilde smiled sympathetically. "Some cities just aren't big enough, are they? All right, Kelden. I imagine you must be pretty nervous. Most people are when we interview them. But just try to relax and answer as honestly as you can, right?"

Kelden smiled, hoping he didn't look as jittery as he felt. "All right. Shoot. So to speak."

Fairchilde allowed the corners of his mouth to flicker; Petrusko showed no reaction. "Right, then," said Fairchilde. "Let's begin with the time you arrived at the party."

"I really don't know," admitted Kelden. "I walked from my apartment, and I didn't notice the time."

"Can you give an estimate?"

"Not really. It was well after it'd started, I think, but I'd kind of lost track of time."

"Why?"

"I beg your pardon?"

Fairchilde pulled a sheet of paper out of the pile in front of Petrusko. "A couple of people have commented that you seemed, as they put it -" he glanced at the paper "- 'to have already started partying'. Is that reasonably accurate?"

How much do they already know? Kelden wondered. *I'll have to be careful.* "Yes. That's why I didn't drive or notice the time."

"Drunk or stoned?"

"Stoned."

"On -?"

"Marijuana." *If I'm to be charged, please let it be only for drugs!*

Fairchilde waited for Petrusko to finish writing, then continued. "All right. You got to the party after it started. Were the bongos already in use?"

Kelden thought. "No. That was quite a while later."

"Any other drugs?"

"No. Well, not then."

Fairchilde nodded, as though something had been confirmed. "Were you drinking?"

"Yes."

"Heavily?"

Kelden hesitated. "I guess so. Yes."

"Did you see Laurie Pachis arrive?"

"No."

"You're positive?"

It was Kelden's turn to allow the corners of his mouth to twitch. "As positive as I can be about anything that night. I didn't see her come in the door."

Fairchilde nodded. "When did you first notice her?"

Kelden shook his head. "I have no idea."

"Was it before or after they brought out the bongs?"

"I'm pretty sure it was after." Kelden frowned in concentration. "We were in the basement."

"What's your relationship with her?"

"Relationship? Ah – we've dated several times. We like each other quite a bit."

"Lovers?"

Kelden smiled. "No. As they say, we're 'just good friends.'"

"How did you feel when you saw her?"

"Pardon?"

"Were you happy? Upset? Anxious?"

Kelden spread his hands. "I'm not sure. I went looking for her after I saw her, I think. It seems to me I was glad she was there."

Fairchilde nodded and consulted another of Petrusko's papers. "We think Laurie arrived about one to two hours before you say you saw her. During that time she became quite inebriated and began flirting with many of the men involved in her assault. Did you observe any of these exchanges?"

"No!"

Detective Petrusko looked up and spoke for the first

time. "You seem surprised. Was she normally not this forward?"

"Not at all!" Kelden shook his head. "I was the only guy she was involved with, or wanted to be. She was normally very - standoffish, I guess you'd say. Not unfriendly, just not - sexual."

"Was she with you?" Petrusko asked.

"Not really. We'd kissed a couple of times, but they were, like, goodnight kisses."

"What about your own behavior at the party?" Detective Fairchilde resumed the questioning.

"What do you mean?"

Fairchilde glanced at the papers again. "Several of the women stated you were coming on strong."

Kelden rubbed his face. It was very warm. "Yeah. I guess so."

Fairchilde nodded. "Is it possible Laurie saw that and was jealous?"

"I really don't know. We'd never discussed how we felt about each other."

"Really?" Petrusko looked up again. "Isn't that a bit odd?"

"Well, I'd started to, once or twice, but she seemed kind of uncomfortable, so I never pushed it."

"What about you?" Fairchilde asked. "Were you jealous when you saw her with the other men?"

Kelden frowned. "I don't think so, but it's all pretty fuzzy."

"Right, then. You saw her in the basement, and were 'glad she was there'. Then what?"

Kelden sighed. "I don't know. I must've left the basement, because I remember being on the main floor. But I don't know how I got there."

Fairchilde opened a small envelope and shook a couple of pills into his palm. "Did you see Laurie or anyone else take any of these?"

Kelden shook his head. "I don't think so."

"Did you take any?"

"I'm sorry. I don't remember."

"Do you recall feeling any changes in yourself? Say, from lethargy to a sudden burst of energy?"

Kelden thought a moment, and then nodded. "Yes. I felt something like electricity, like someone flipped on a switch. And like someone had replaced all my blood with ice."

Petrusko nodded. "You had at least one, whether you remember it or not. They're a recent designer drug, nicknamed "Frost". Their effects are highly unpredictable, depending on how much you take and what else you might already have in your system. But the most common are a sudden feeling of cold throughout your system and a sudden explosion of energy or strength. From what little we've seen around here, Laurie had twice the usual amount in her bloodstream. She's probably lucky that and the alcohol didn't kill her. We won't know what effect it's had on her brain 'til she wakes up. If she ever does. You look kind of shook."

"I am," Kelden confessed. "I mean, I knew she was acting kind of weird, but I didn't know it was anything like *that*."

"'Acting weird'?" Fairchilde pounced on his statement. "You saw her again?"

"Yes. I wandered into the back hall, and she was there."

"With someone?"

"No. Alone."

"Dressed?"

"Yes. I think so, yes."

"What was she doing?"

"I think -" Kelden closed his eyes. "Yes . . . she was leaning against the wall, running her hands over her own body."

"Did you approach her?"

Careful, thought Kelden. *Just as you rehearsed it. Don't get trapped.* "Yes, I did."

"Did she see you?"

"I don't know. I remember talking to her, but she didn't answer."

"Did you touch her?"

Kelden closed his eyes again and frowned. "Yes, I'm pretty sure – yes, I did."

"What exactly did you do?"

"I don't remember *exactly*. Took her hand or arm, I think."

"Did you put your arm around her?"

"I don't know. Possibly."

"What were you planning on doing?"

Kelden rubbed his beard with the back of his hand, hard. "I think I wanted to take her home."

"And do what?"

"I'm not sure. I just remember thinking I had to get her out of there."

"Why?" asked Petrusko. "Did you want to have sex with her?"

"I've wanted to do *that* since I met her in college!" Kelden surprised himself with his honesty. "But, no, I was worried about her. I'd never seen her like that before. It scared me." *Actually*, he thought, *that's not exactly a lie. I remember – I think – being disturbed by how she was acting. Or was I just aroused?*

Fairchilde broke into his thoughts. "You wanted to get her out of there. What happened then?"

"She started to come with me, but then she freaked out. Her eyes scared me. I don't think she knew who I was." The haunted look in Kelden's own eyes was genuine. "She pulled away and started fighting me."

"Did you fight back?"

"I don't know. I might've. I remember grabbing at her, trying to stop her. I thought she was going to hurt herself. Or me. I'm not sure, but I think I accidentally tore her blouse." He squeezed his eyes shut and gritted his teeth, reliving the few vivid flashes of his rage and her fear. "Huh?"

"What happened next?" Fairchilde repeated softly.

"She kicked me, I think."

"Where?"

"In the balls. Sorry, the groin."

"Hard?"

Kelden nodded. "I thought I was gonna puke."

"Did you let her go?"

"It's kind of jumbled. I think I grabbed her harder, just to keep from falling over."

"Did she keep struggling?" asked Petrusko.

"I don't know. Probably. I know I ended up down the back stairs, but I don't remember if I fell, or she knocked me down, or what. I know I'm a lot bigger than she is, but I think maybe she did know me down."

Petrusko exchanged glances with Fairchilde. "Wouldn't surprise me. With those pills in her – it took five men to hold her down while they raped her."

"Jeez." Kelden stared, feeling sick again. "I didn't know."

Fairchilde nodded and Petrusko made a note. Then Fairchilde said, "Right, then. You're on the floor at the foot of the stairs. Did you see anyone else come back?"

Kelden shook his head. "I was hurting too bad. I just saw the door and wanted to get out."

"Could you hear anything?"

"God, yes!" Kelden dropped all pretense. "She was screaming. God, I'll never forget that! It was horrible!"

"Didn't you think to go back and see what was wrong?" asked Petrusko.

"Man, I *couldn't* think!" cried Kelden. "I was sick, I was scared, I was messed up – I just wanted to get out of there!"

"I understand," Fairchilde said calmly, and Petrusko made another note. "You want any more coffee?" Kelden shook his head and slowly unclenched his fists. When he seemed calmer, Fairchilde continued. "You wanted to leave. Did you?"

Kelden nodded. "I must have. Next thing I remember is being outside, in the back yard."

"Were you aware at all of what was going on inside?"

"I'm not sure. I think I remember her screaming and a bunch of guys shouting and laughing, but I don't know if I really heard that or just think I did."

"And then you went home?"

"I don't know. I must've climbed the fence; my hands and arms and legs and clothes were all torn up the next day, and I must've finally gotten sick, but I don't remember how or when I got home."

Fairchilde glanced a question at his partner. Petrusko shook his head, so Fairchilde nodded and said, pleasantly, "I think that should do it. Could you wait here for just a moment?" Then the two of them gathered their papers and left the room.

Kelden forced himself to relax. For good or ill, it was over. Perhaps he'd have to pay a fine for the drugs, but he should have avoided a more serious charge. And, after all, what had he really done? Tried to kiss her, true, but she'd overreacted. Detective Petrusko himself had said it took five strong men to hold her down; he *had* to defend himself. It wasn't really his fault, was it, that her screams had drawn the rest of them? It wasn't. He hadn't really done anything to her. And, anyway, he couldn't control himself. *So why the hell wouldn't her screams leave him alone?*

"Mr. Scott?"

He jumped slightly and turned. Detective Fairchilde was just closing the door behind him. He remained standing, however, with his hand on the knob.

"Thank you for your cooperation," Fairchilde said. "You're free to go."

Kelden blinked. "I'm not being - I mean -"

"Charged?" Fairchilde smiled slightly. "Not at this time. We're ignoring the drug use, at least for the moment, since you didn't try to deny it, and we're focusing right now on the assault. For now, it appears you weren't directly involved with that, but I suggest you stay where we can find you if we need more answers." He opened the door. Kelden stood and began to leave, but Fairchilde stopped him as he passed. "By the way," he added quietly, "I believe you were involved in a disturbance at Bricker's about a week ago?" Kelden nodded, suddenly cold. "I would recommend you take care. If this becomes a regular habit, we'll have to arrest you eventually."

Kelden nodded again and left quickly.

The tension of the last hours hit him hard as he stepped out onto the sidewalk. He sat on a bus stop bench for ten minutes, trembling. He wanted desperately to find a bar somewhere, but Nicolette wanted to see him. He'd better appear before her completely sober.

The walk back to AgriState steadied him. He came in through the front door; Nicolette intercepted him before he got to the computer room. "I saw you come in," she explained as she led him to her office. "I hope you don't think I was lying in wait for you."

"No, not at all," he lied smoothly. She accepted it at face value, and offered him a seat.

"So." She sat also and placed her hands flat on her desk top. "How did it go?"

"As well as one can expect a police interview to go, I guess. I'm just glad it's over."

"Is it over? I'm not trying to pry, but I've got to know what to expect. I'm looking at some pretty major personnel changes, including a good chunk of my computer staff."

"I understand," Kelden nodded. "I haven't been charged, and it doesn't appear I will be."

Nicolette sighed. "Thank God. With Jim gone, you're our best programmer."

"Jim's definitely not coming back?"

"Well, it's not certain. But the legal department believes it's going to be all but impossible to beat an attempted murder charge with all those witnesses, even if most of them were stoned out of their heads. He hasn't offered a resignation, and I'm not demanding one unless and until he's officially found guilty, but we're going to have to treat his loss as permanent."

"What about the others?"

"Well, we're approaching each on an individual basis, of course, looking at the extent of their involvement, the seriousness of the charges, and – though I hate to say it – the visibility of their position with us. But I think we can retain at least half of them – after a temporary suspension."

Kelden nodded. "And what about me?"

"What about you?"

Kelden met Nicolette's steady gaze with one of his own. "I was at that party, too. I was stoned out of my mind. I may have - inadvertently - contributed to Laurie's attack."

"But they didn't charge you with anything?"

"Like I said, no."

After a moment of silence, Nicolette said, quietly, "You didn't have to admit any of that. I wouldn't've known it, officially."

"But unofficially?"

"There would have been rumors and gossip, yes."

"Then it's better you heard it now. Officially. From me."

"Yes. You're right." She picked up a pen and toyed with it. Kelden waited patiently. At last she said, "Since you weren't formally charged, I won't formally suspend you. Besides, I need you here. With Jim gone, we need a new shift supervisor, and while the others have been here longer, it's generally agreed you have the knowledge and talent. Would you like the position?"

Kelden blinked. He'd expected punishment, not a reward. "I - yes! Of course I would!"

Nicolette sat back. "This offer comes with one big string - or a rope, suitable for hanging yourself, if you wish. You'll be on probation the next six months. Any problems from this or any other incident - even a single DUI - and you're back to square one. Agreed?"

"Agreed."

"Fine." They stood and shook hands. "All salary and bonus increases are effective as of today. Best of luck, Kelden."

"Thanks, Nicolette." He started to leave, then paused. "Um - what have you heard about Laurie?"

"Not much. She's still under sedation. She's expected to recover physically, in time. But what this is going to do to her mentally and emotionally - we'll just have to wait and see. I doubt she'll be ready to come back in the near future. You two were close, weren't you? I'm sorry. I wish I had better news."

"Thank you."

Kelden hurried back to his terminal, where he spent what was left of the afternoon preparing to move to Jim's office and trying to feel better about it.

He never did succeed.



Occasionally, we're granted an objective glimpse of ourselves. It's a dark gift; the truth, unfiltered through our egos, can be devastating. For one brief, bleak moment, Kelden saw himself with the eyes of those who knew him, and he saw an arrogant, hedonistic, self-centered bastard. Something exploded in his head, and a strangled cry tore his throat. . . .

Chapter 2

Things grew worse after work. Kelden stopped at a bar, hoping to relax. The first beer did no apparent good, so he tried a second, and a third, in rapid succession. It was midway through his fourth – or was it his fifth? – that he remembered the orchestra rehearsal.

He tried all he could to neutralize so much alcohol on an empty stomach, but he hadn't even approached sobriety when he arrived at the auditorium. If anything, he'd gotten worse. Of all the things he'd done while drunk, playing music hadn't been one of them. He was unable to count measures correctly, his entrances were shaky and often late or early, his intonation was erratic, and more than once he started falling asleep during long rests. He overcompensated for his errors, which only made things worse. No one said anything, although Ben Reinthaler and several others looked at him oddly. By the end of the evening, he was sweating heavily.

After packing away his bassoon, Kelden crumpled into an auditorium seat. His head ached. He took off his glasses and pressed the heels of his hands against his eyes; when he opened and refocused them, he saw Paige and Kathy watching. He put his glasses back on and gave them a bleak smile, hoping Paige, at least, would come over. But they turned away, Kathy with a frown, Paige without expression.

He managed a reasonably steady walk to his car. Remembering Nicolette's admonishment, he drove carefully, convinced that out there somewhere Fairchilde and Petrusko had a citation with his name already on it. He got all the way into his apartment before he fell apart.

He careened into the bathroom and threw up. Then, to his own amazement, he started sobbing uncontrollably. He gripped the edges of the sink and shook and moaned until exhaustion took over. Then he mechanically rinsed his mouth and the bowl before he stumbled out, more emotionally battered now than drunk, to collapse on his couch.

I can't take any more of this, he thought over and over again, until he finally caught himself.

Much more of what?

Of this! Of everything!

What? The pressure? The drinking? The drugs? The sex?

Well – yes, even the sex. Because that's what it all came down to, wasn't it? If he hadn't planned from the first to take Laurie to bed, he wouldn't have attacked her – and, despite what he'd told the detectives, despite what he'd almost convinced himself of, he *had* attacked her, he *had* started to rape her, and it was his fault she'd had to face the worst nightmare of her life. It didn't matter that he hadn't completed the act. The violation had begun the moment he'd seized her. Even if nothing else had happened, even if her cries had gone unnoticed and she'd run into the night, otherwise unharmed, she would still have been abused and violated. By him.

But I was high, and drunk, and out of control, he argued silently. *I couldn't help it. I didn't know what I was doing. She was doing those things in the hall, and I just couldn't help myself!*

Bullshit!

But I couldn't!

The hell you couldn't. And even if you really couldn't think clearly and tell right from wrong at that point, it was still your decision to get stoned and drink and take that pill. Well, maybe not that pill – I don't even remember doing that. I must've really been gone by then. But it's been my choice to screw as many women as possible. And what's it gotten me? Paige and Kathy aren't speaking to me. Claudia and Kayla aren't speaking to me or each other. Half the LSU co-eds are avoiding me, if I don't avoid them first. There's a bar out in Fairbury I can't even walk into in case I run into that woman or her husband. And I've got Laurie screaming her mind out in the hospital. Was David right? Am I trying to out-do Beth? God,

even she wasn't this sick!

The thought of David reminded him of their severed friendship. Sex was at the heart of that, too, in a different way. Was sex at the heart of it all? Suddenly, Kelden was thoroughly, overwhelmingly, unutterably sick of sex, of drinking, of drugs. Rage rose deep inside; helpless, hopeless rage, directed at himself. The harder he tried to repress it, the stronger it grew. He had, single-handedly, destroyed Laurie's life, almost destroyed his own, wounded Paige and Kathy and David and God knew how many others – some whose names he'd never even known – and all for his own damned *lust!*

Occasionally, we're granted an objective glimpse of ourselves. It's a dark gift; the truth, unfiltered through our egos, can be devastating. For one brief, bleak moment, Kelden saw himself with the eyes of those who knew him, and he saw an arrogant, hedonistic, self-centered bastard. Something exploded in his head, and a strangled cry tore his throat. The hate he felt for his parents or Beth or anyone else couldn't approach what he now felt for himself and whatever was controlling his life. Swearing without pause, he swung blindly into his kitchen and snatched bottles of vodka and wine and rum and whiskey and beer from the cupboards and the refrigerator and hurled them in the sink, sending knives of glass and gouts of alcohol flying. He ran into his bedroom, ripped the last three ounces of grass and his cigarette papers from their hiding place, shredded the papers into confetti, and emptied the plastic bag into the toilet. Finally, he seized his condoms from the medicine chest and stumbled out to his tiny practice room, where he threw open the fire escape door and flung the boxes far into the night. Then, spent, he sank to the steps and began to laugh.

The breeze eventually cooled his hysteria. He leaned back against the brick wall, and quiet tears of mourning, for himself and all who'd had the misfortune to touch his life – especially Laurie – ran down his cheeks. It would be hard, and few would believe him, but he would change. This, at least, he could do for her. He would follow David's advice

and become celibate. He would change his attitude toward women and develop friends instead of bedroom partners. He was suddenly overwhelmed with a longing for a simple conversation with Paige and for the type of friendship she symbolized. The type of friendship he could've had with Laurie, if he'd just allowed it to happen. And with Kathy. And maybe, God help him, with Beth and Vicki and every one of those girls from high school on.

He stopped himself as he veered back toward despair. Something else that would have to go, not just for tonight, but for good, were the drugs and, yes, even the drinking. He had a feeling that if he wasn't already an alcoholic, it was only a matter of time. He would have to quit completely, stay out of bars, find something else to do with his evenings. At least he wouldn't have to worry about all his good buddies mocking him. He didn't have any.

Once again he felt the loss of David and Tony. Maybe, in a couple of days, he would call David. Just to see if he'd heard from Tony or gotten through to him. Not that it wouldn't be nice to just talk to David again. He snorted. *Jeez, you're so transparent. Why not just admit you want his friendship back? Because,* he answered himself, *that would mean accepting Michael Bachman, and I'm not sure I'm ready for that. Not yet.*

Not yet? Does that imply I eventually will?

"That's asking a little much, don't you think?" He spoke aloud, shaking his head. His carefully balanced spine shifted and a bit of mortar tried to burrow between two ribs. He straightened with a hissing gasp. It was clearly time to go in. Anyway, he was getting cold and sleepy. He ignored the mess in his apartment and went to bed.

He had a lot of cleaning to do after work the next night, but he hurried and still made it to his class. He had missed too many in a row, and they were coming into the final weeks. There, his new vows met their first test. Claudia was still ignoring him, but as he crossed the campus afterward Kayla showed up and offered him a key to her new apartment. He accepted, already dreaming up schemes to get the mother over there in the daughter's absence. Then he saw Laurie's eyes again. He handed the

key back and told her he couldn't see her any more. Ever. She was momentarily speechless, then transcended her shock with such vehemence and venom that the night was treated to a loud and detailed declaration on Kelden's pedigree, morals, and manhood. The echoes of her blistering commentary were greeted by a distant sound of solitary applause.

Wednesday morning, the AgriState party exploded back into public consciousness with a front page story in both the Fell Park *Register* and the Pontiac *Daily Leader*, detailing the charges against those arrested, with names. The *Daily Journal* in Kankakee had a similar article on page two. It was on page four, without names, of the Bloomington *Daily Pantagraph*, and page eight of the Peoria *Journal-Star*. Because of AgriState's status in the Midwest, small article made Chicago's *Tribune* and *Sun Times*, *USA Today* had a brief mention of the shakeup among AgriState's personnel, and rumors were circulating that *The National Enquirer* had landed an exclusive interview with the fiancée of one of the accused rapists. Almost simultaneously, it took on a separate internet life.

By afternoon, AgriState's receptionists were beginning to talk of combat pay. They were only partly joking. Depositors and investors throughout the country had read or heard of the incident and were demanding more information. Some had heard that the president and board of directors had been arrested and that the institution was tottering under the scandal and about to be bought out by a Chinese megabank. The receptionists quickly and efficiently set them straight, assuring them that the whole affair, while sensational, was a relatively small, local disruption that would have little or no effect on business. Other callers were more concerned that the attack was merely the tip of a morally corrupt iceberg and that their funds were in jeopardy of mismanagement. These were transferred to various customer service representatives or vice-presidents (as required) who assured them that this was an isolated incident highly unrepresentative of the quality of AgriState's employees, and that, while they firmly

believed a lapse of judgment outside of business hours did not necessarily reflect on their commitment to the proper and professional handling of their jobs, AgriState had decided to discipline those involved up to and including dismissal. Finally, those who remained unconvinced in the face of every official assurance were ultimately referred to customer service representatives who reluctantly assisted them in withdrawing their assets, waiving all penalties as far as federal law permitted as a personal apology from the president of AgriState in the sincere hope that these customers would consider them again in the future. This small but significant percentage kept Kelden and his reduced crew juggling numbers and files well into Wednesday night and far enough past closing on Thursday that he barely made class. Friday they got away from work on time, but only after a grueling day. Kelden allowed the other programmers to talk him into a quick drink to relax and celebrate his promotion. They drove him home a few hours later and left him on his couch.

The weekend was a total loss. Depressed by his failure, Kelden spent Saturday and Sunday in a drugged haze with a particularly unattractive LSU co-ed who brought a distinctly careless attitude to her appearance and grooming and who'd allowed herself to fall into a number of distasteful and extremely irritating habits. But Kelden wanted someone as low as he felt, until, about nine o'clock Sunday evening, he could stand neither her nor himself any longer and left her passed out in her own vomit on her dorm room floor. His departure was met with sniggers and crude comments from some of the other women who lived there. His face burned, but he said nothing. He knew he deserved no better.



“ . . . Nobody had cried for me since my three-year-old sister watched our father beat me. . . . ”

Background: Pennsylvania

Paige's sister

Paige Santori (in her early teens)

Paige's father

Foreground: Chicago

Unidentified Christian

Chapter 3

"Are you doing anything for Thanksgiving?"

Kelden blinked at Paige. "Sorry?"

"Thanksgiving. Do you have plans?"

He stared, tempted to invent something so that he might not seem too pathetic. Then he shook his head and continued to pack away his bassoon. "I haven't spent a holiday with my family since high school, if I could help it. And there's no one down here to spend it with."

"You could spend it with me."

Kelden snapped the case shut. "Don't you have family? Or Kathy?"

Paige shook her head. "What's left of my family are in Pennsylvania, and we have no desire to see each other. Too many memories. And Kathy has her own plans."

"Which leaves me."

"Are you trying to make me mad at you? 'Cause you'll have to find some other form of self-punishment. I'm inviting you for Thanksgiving because I want to. You can accept or not, but I'd appreciate knowing as soon as possible so I can plan." She picked up her violin case and walked away.

"Paige?" Kelden called after her. "I'll be there."

She paused and looked back. "Bring a vegetable and dessert. Three o'clock." Then she left the auditorium.

That one conversation did more for Kelden than anything else could have. After his weekend of failure he was ready to abandon reform and go out in a glorious blaze of pure hedonism. Paige's simple invitation reignited his determination to overcome whatever the world could throw at him. He'd never felt such extremes of depression and

elation, and so quickly. It frightened him a bit.

I've got to get hold of myself, he thought. Yeah, I blew it Friday night. It's gonna happen, I can't expect to change so soon. And I should never have gotten involved with that – that pig, that slut! God, I'll never live that down! But it's over, everyone'll forget about it eventually. Especially her, if I'm lucky. Oh, Lord – I didn't make any promises, did I? No – no! And even if I did, I can't be held to something like that! Come on, man. You're babbling. You can control your life. You can. Just calm down.

And then he thought, *Paige still likes me!*, and grinned all the way home.

The days passed rapidly to Thursday, which seemed like it would never arrive. Anticipation gave Kelden the strength Tuesday to turn down an after-class offer of three ounces of pure, high-quality grass from his on-campus connection. When Deborah, the former Pizza Express driver, called later the same night to say she was in town again, it gave him the incentive to tell her he was exhausted. And it gave him the courage to refuse when the computer room personnel wanted him to join them for a few beers after work on Wednesday. He didn't want to disappoint Paige.

On Thursday afternoon, at precisely three, Kelden knocked at Paige's door, sober and aglow with the knowledge that he could, indeed, control his life. She welcomed him with a warm smile and accepted his dish of asparagus almandine, container of Hollandaise, and homemade pumpkin pie. He offered to help in the kitchen, but she refused.

"It's my turn," she said. "You go to the living room and relax."

"I really feel I should -" he began, then skidded to a halt, verbally and physically, at the sight of the small figure, sitting on a chair, staring out of the living room window, her dreamy smile reflected on the glass. She was dressed in denim overalls and faded plaid shirt. Nut-brown hair spilled down her back in a ponytail, and her feet were bare. Her tiny chin was cupped in her hands. Kelden was taken with the beauty of her image on the pane, even as his head whirled in confusion. Paige never once mentioned a daughter. Or was she babysitting? Or -?

"What -?" Paige came up behind him, then laughed and said, "Come meet Sarah Lynne. I forget how real she looks."

Kelden examined the soft-sculpture doll. "She's incredible. Did you make her?"

"Thanks, but I'm afraid not. I drew her one day when I was feeling exceptionally hopeless. She's based on my little sister, the last time I saw her. I showed her to a woman I met at a craft show, and she made her for me. She's been a real comfort through some tough times. I hold her and rock her and sing to her when I'm especially lonely."

Paige's eyes glistened, and Kelden felt a sharp pang, wondering that she was still willing to share so much with him. But when she finished rearranging Sarah Lynne and turned back, she was smiling.

"I have to finish in the kitchen," she said, "but feel free to turn on the game if you want."

"Thanks, but I'm not much on football. Although," he added hastily, "if you want to"

"That's all right," she called from the other room. "I like playing than watching. I had to give up touch football at about fourteen, though, when the boys became more interested in the touch than the football. If you'd rather listen to music, you can look through my collection."

Paige had several shelves of CDs. Her taste in classical music covered all eras with special emphasis on the Baroque, early Romantic, and Impressionistic. She had quite a bit of folk, from well known artists like Judy Collins and Peter, Paul and Mary to more obscure singers like Paul Parrish. And she had a wide selection of artists of whom Kelden had never heard, with names like Red; The Normals; Day of Fire; Whitecross; BarlowGirl; Rachel, Rachel; and Bloodgood. After a glance at the inserts, he realized these were what he would have scornfully referred to as "religious" – although he'd never heard of any hymn singers going under such names as Thousand Foot Krutch or having such dynamic album art.

"Found anything yet? Sorry!"

Kelden had jumped; he hadn't heard Paige come up

behind him. "That's all right. I don't know - I've never heard of any of these." He started replacing the CD in he was holding.

"Let's see what you've got." As she leaned close, Kelden caught a whiff of soap, light perfume, and turkey. It was a delightful mixture. "A.D.? Ah - do you like Kansas?"

"Very much!"

"Well, A.D. is the group Kerry Livgren founded when he left Kansas. It's different, but you can hear the Kansas influence. I think you'll like it." She loaded it, then sank into a leather armchair. Kelden sat on the floor, his back against the couch, not too far from her. They listened for a while, and Kelden had to admit it was nothing like any religious music he'd ever heard. He actually liked it.

"So, how's it going?" Paige asked, halfway through the second song.

"What do you mean? How's what going?"

"Your attempt to restructure your life."

Kelden stared at her. "How did you know?"

"I wasn't certain," she admitted, "but I had a feeling."

"You're spooky, you know that?"

She grinned. "To know me is to fear me. Well?"

Kelden laughed. "*You tell me.*"

"Well, based on the possibly spurious assumption that you're human -"

"Thanks."

"Don't mention it - I'd say you've probably succeeded nicely and failed miserably."

"This isn't advertising double-talk, is it?"

Paige shook her head. "I'm an artist, not a writer. I'm also human, like you, and I know what it's like to try to change your life. Especially under your own power. You'll have moments of spectacular triumph, and moments of complete humiliation. The thrill of victory, the agony of defeat. You've probably experienced both in the past week or so, right?"

"You have a way of getting to the heart of these things, don't you?" Kelden studied her. She smiled gently and waited. Then he said, "All right. Yes. I did great for

about three days, went down in flames, and was about to give it all up when you invited me over."

She nodded. "I suspected you needed a bit of encouragement right about then."

"Wait a minute – are we talking about that – what is it? That special understanding, or whatever it is you say you have?"

Paige hesitated a second. "Actually . . . the Bible calls it the 'gift of knowledge'. It's one of -"

Kelden held up his hand. "Please – I'd rather not get into it."

"Hey, you asked! Anyway, you can't keep running from God because you had a bad experience with the church."

"Would you quit doing that?!"

"What?"

"Reading my life, or whatever the hell it is you're doing!"

"I'm sorry! I thought we'd discussed your religious past at least once before. Didn't we?"

"I doubt it. And I don't want to do it now, okay?"

"Okay. But do you mind if I talk about mine?"

Kelden shrugged. "That's up to you."

"Not really." Paige smiled. "I don't want you to feel you have to listen just because I'm feeding you."

"Like the bums and winos who pay for a 'free' meal at the mission by sitting through a sermon?"

Paige snorted. "Sort of. Only you're not a bum."

Kelden winced. "Left-handed compliment?"

"I wouldn't call it that. If you're right-handed, you might."

"You're left-handed? I never noticed."

"I used to make a big deal of it. It was one of the things my parents did in the name of God. We were part of a strict, independent fundamentalist congregation, kind of on the fringes. They had a lot of off-the-wall beliefs – they believed because Scripture talked about the 'victorious right hand' and 'strong right arm' of God, and Jesus told us we weren't to 'let the left hand know what the right hand is

doing', that the left hand is more inclined toward evil. So they beat me into being right-handed. I got pretty good at it, but when I left at sixteen I became a militant 'lefty'. Now I use both, especially for my work, but it was a long time before I could use my right hand without anger or my left without shame. And that was just one thing. We were forbidden to read fiction or watch TV or movies or plays because they were, in effect, lies. And non-fiction and news weren't much better - they were the tools of Satan designed to twist the truth in our minds. Games using cards and dice were forbidden, including Crazy Eights and board games, because of their 'connection' with gambling. Children were expected to obey instantly and without question any command by any adult, no matter how capricious it seemed, or we could expect liberal application of the 'rod of discipline'. And if we left any of our chores undone, we got no food that day, because Scripture says 'if any man will not work, let him not eat'."

"But how did they justify the - you know - the other things they did to you?"

"The sexual abuse? They didn't. That was the family secret. All the girls were expected to let the men and boys of the family - any of them - do whatever they wanted. If any of us objected, we were bullied or battered or Scriptured into submission."

"But can't you do anything? Legally, I mean?"

"The past is the past," Paige replied flatly. "Most of us don't want to disturb what's dead and gone. As for any current abuse - well, after I ran away, others began fighting back. One of my sisters-in-law divorced my brother for what he did to their daughter. A cousin who tried to rape one of my nieces was beaten by her father. And my youngest sister stabbed one of our uncles with a nail file. He broke her arm, but he left her alone after that."

Kelden shook his head. "And you can still be religious?"

"Religious? No. A Christian? Yes."

Kelden's lips twitched. "Isn't that what they call a 'pilpul'?"

"A hair-splitting argument based on a fine legal distinction? Not really. A religion is a set of rules, a blueprint for earning heaven or nirvana or whatever the reward, if you're good enough and careful enough. Religions involve a lot of failure, a lot of judgment, and a lot of hypocrisy, because if you follow the rules and keep up appearances, what difference does it make where your heart's at? A lot of so-called 'Christianity' is only religion. But real Christianity is a complete way of life based on a real relationship with the God of the universe. It has its rules, yes, because we need them to teach us how to relate to each other with kindness and mercy and love. You don't have to earn your way to heaven, because that's yours as a gift from the moment you acknowledge your rebellion against God and Christ's payment for that rebellion, and the only way to lose that gift is to willingly give it up. And although you're promised extra rewards in heaven and on earth for following God's laws, the primary focus is on the heart. If your heart is right with God, you won't have to force yourself to follow a set of rules – you'll want what He wants, out of love for Him."

"So you're brainwashed into having the 'proper' attitude."

"In some churches, yes, you could call it that. But in the best ones, you're simply presented with the Scriptural viewpoint, and it's ultimately up to you whether or not you want to put it into practice."

"And if you don't want to? Or can't? Are you booted out?"

"Sometimes, depending on the consequences of your decision. But that's more to preserve peace in the church than to punish the infidel. Most of the time it's understood that God deals with people at different speeds, and it may take one person longer than another – if ever – to align himself with God."

"With that church's interpretation of God."

"With God, as revealed in the Bible. And don't give me the argument about how the Bible can be interpreted in so many different ways. The ambiguity comes when someone

tries to pull out a verse or two without considering the historical, cultural, or textual context. The more you know about the whole Bible, the more you understand how specific and open to only limited interpretation it really is. As far as an inability to follow God, that's where the support of a community comes in. And the power of the Holy Spirit, and these special gifts, like my special knowledge. They're not to be used to gain control over other people – that's a blatant misuse of the Spirit, although it happens – but to further refine your character and to help others. So there really is a big difference between 'religion' and Christianity, and it's not just a pilpul. And since when does a full-blooded Scotsman know what a 'pilpul' is?"

"Since when does a full-blooded Italian?" Kelden retorted. "There are Jews in Italy and Scotland, you know, not just Catholics and druids. Actually, I picked it up from Rabbi David Small."

"Harry Kemelman's detective! Yes! I love his mysteries – although I didn't think anyone else was still aware of them! Do you know Heron Carvic, Agatha Christie, G.K. Chesterton, and Dorothy Sayers?"

"Carvic and Chesterton, no, although I'm with you on Sayers and, of course, Christie. What about P.D. James."

"Sorry, haven't read him."

"Her."

"Ah. I beg her pardon. But what was I saying? Oh, yeah – there is a difference, and enough of one that I can honestly say that what I lived under the first sixteen years of my life and what I've been living the last few are like night and day."

Kelden studied her, and then said, "This is not just some philosophical experiment for you, is it? You're really serious."

"You just now figured that out?" cried Paige in mock dismay. Then, quietly, she said, "I wish you'd known me about three and a half years ago. I was one cocky, cynical, bitter, vicious bitch. I'd been living on the streets for almost ten years, and you don't survive the streets unless you're steel. I knew every dirty trick and punch and used them all."

The only things I didn't do were take drugs or hook, because I'd vowed no man would ever control me or touch me again. I hated men and I used women, and I came close to dying more than once and I killed one man who decided I was going to hook for him whether I liked it or not. And I would have died on the street, except for a small group of radical Christians – the kind who would've been called 'Jesus Freaks' in the '60s – who lived together in the worst part of the city with us and spoke our language and knew our hells because they'd lived them, too. They loved me in spite of all I did to them. And I did some pretty lousy things because I thought they represented everything I'd escaped. More than once I swore I wasn't going to have anything more to do with them, but I kept going back.

“Then one night the woman I lived with tossed me back onto the street. She said she'd found another lover who wasn't so self-centered. I went to these people and screamed at them about how I hated my life and everyone around me and God most of all, and they really listened and really understood. And I saw them crying for me – the guys, too – and that shook me. Nobody had cried for me since my three-year-old sister watched our father beat me, before they beat the tears out of her. And I finally admitted to them that I was sick of my life, and they told me how God could change it from the inside, from the heart, and though I'd heard it a dozen times before from them and constantly in my family's church, I really listened and heard this time and finally saw the difference between what they had and what I'd been tortured with in my parents' house. I started shaking, and they came and took my hands and held me, and it was the first loving, non-sexual contact I could ever remember. I hadn't cried since I was eight – that was beaten out of me, too, and it never seemed to stop anything, anyway. But I broke down and wept for the first time in some twenty years. I gave in to God that night, accepted Christ's death as the payment for my own rebellion, asked Him to become a permanent part of my life, and was flooded with the Holy Spirit. I hadn't been afraid of anything for years, but I had to be honest now,

with God and with other people and, most of all, with myself, and I didn't know if I could stand it, because all of a sudden I knew, deep in my heart, what God had meant for me to be, and I knew how far I was from being that woman. I was terrified, but I held on – I'd tasted freedom, and I'd tasted what He had for me and it was what I'd wanted all my life.

“So that's where I come from, and that's how I know it's all real. And that's how I know what you're facing. I'd forged a woman of ice and iron and granite that I could no longer change, and yet six months later my former lover walked right past me without recognizing me. All the time we'd been together, in our most intimate moments, I'd never smiled or given her the slightest warmth or tenderness. I was a complete stranger to her now. God had done what I couldn't and changed the unchangeable woman. And that's why I'm pretty sure that, while you'll make a good attempt and maybe even see some success, you're not going to be able to make a complete and lasting change on your own. My will was street-hardened, and I couldn't do it. You're going to need God just as much as I did.”

Kelden sat in silence a moment, and then shrugged. “I don't know. You make a pretty strong case, and with a little more time and effort you could maybe even make me a Christian. Or maybe I can make it without religion.”

“It's not religion, Kel.”

“All right, I know what you said. And maybe you're right. But I've got to learn that for myself.”

Paige sighed. “I know you do.” A smile teased her lips. “For all our differences, in some ways we're a lot alike.” A buzzer rasped in the kitchen. She leapt to her feet. “Turkey's done! And now I *will* let you help me!”

They set the table and served the food together, then sat and ate and laughed and discussed literature and music and the silly, insignificant moments of their pasts that can later become so important. They recaptured the easy excitement of their first meetings at Java Joe's, but with a depth that came from knowing the darkest corners of each

other's soul and knowing they could trust each other with their secrets. It was a fragile trust, and both knew it could be broken at any time – and who would be most likely to break it – but, for the moment, it was sacred.

After dinner, while they cleaned up, Paige mentioned that she had a Christmas gift to work on. Kelden agreed that an early evening was in order, since he had to go in tomorrow and help the AgriState computers catch up with the last of the party fallout. Paige was reminded to ask after Laurie.

“She's improving slowly. Or so I've heard.”

“You haven't been to see her?”

Kelden didn't answer.

Paige glanced sharply at him. “What's wrong?”

“Didn't your 'special knowledge' tell you?” Kelden answered lightly, but something in his voice made Paige set down the bowl she was putting away.

“Tell me what?” she asked quietly.

Kelden neither answered nor looked at her. His full attention was suddenly focused on the platter he was drying. He hadn't intended to say anything to her, and his heart pounded as he realized what he was on the verge of doing. He couldn't say anything and risk destroying the delicate balance between them.

Paige stopped him with a light touch on his arm. “Tell me what?” she repeated.

Kelden struggled with himself. Then, “I'm the reason she's in there,” he finally said, his voice level, his eyes fixed on the faucets, his mind marveling at his tongue's betrayal.

Paige waited silently.

“I didn't rape her.” For a moment, Kelden's voice was defiant. Then, when Paige still neither moved nor spoke, he told her all he could remember, omitting nothing. Only when he'd finished did he turn his eyes to her. They held both challenge and plea. “Well?”

“If you want me to exonerate you,” Paige said slowly, “I can't. Even if I had that right, what you did was still wrong. Maybe you didn't rape her, but it sounds like you would have.”

"Yes."

"If you want forgiveness, I can't help you there, either. That has to come from God, and from Laurie."

"Jeez, Paige! *Laurie*? She probably doesn't even know I did anything!"

"You can't say what she remembers, can you? But even if she doesn't, you do, and it's obviously already come between you, or you would've gone to her immediately. Are you serious about her?"

"Not like I am about – like I was – about Vicki or Beth." His face felt hot. "She's a friend, someone I enjoyed talking to."

"Huh! You have an odd way of treating your friends. You attack Laurie, you almost attacked me, you're not speaking to David, you insulted Kathy – have you done anything to Tony, yet?"

Kelden's smile was twisted. "He's not here. Otherwise, who knows? – he might be dead by now. Paige, you're not telling me anything I don't already hate myself for. That's why I'm amazed and grateful you're still speaking to me."

"Sometimes I amaze myself. But to get back to Laurie – yes, you'll eventually have to go to her for her forgiveness. Or, if she won't forgive you, you have to at least apologize. I won't ask if you're sorry it happened – that's obvious. Thank God you haven't gone beyond caring. Yet."

"Yet?"

"Yet. Though if you go on hardening yourself, you might lose that part of you, too. And I, for one, would hate to see it go."

"I didn't think there was a caring part of me. At least, not if you listen to Kathy. And David. And Beth and Vicki and about a dozen others I could name. And some I can't."

"Oh, I didn't say you were perfect. But you wouldn't be in this much turmoil if, deep inside, you didn't care. Can you honestly say you're glad you hurt Kathy? Or that it doesn't bother you?"

". . . . No. But how do you know I really do regret hurting her?"

"For one thing, you wouldn't have bothered trying to give her those photographs. I'm afraid it came off like you were trying to buy her off, but I believe you really meant it."

"Well, I thought I did. But what if I did it just to get her back into bed? Or to impress you?"

"As I understand it, you have no lack of sexual partners. If all you wanted was the sex, you would've found someone immediately."

"How do you know I didn't?"

"I don't. But I believe in you. Did you?"

"Find someone else? No."

"There you are. You weren't just after her body. You pretty much admitted that to her yourself."

"What do you mean?"

"When you told her you could find a dozen better than her, and smarter."

"She told you that?!"

"She was hurt. She had to tell someone."

"Well, I was pretty angry. I didn't mean it."

"I think there was truth in it. Oh, I'm sure you intended primarily to hurt her, and you succeeded admirably. But the fact is, you could have just about anybody you wanted."

"Well, not exactly anybody. . . ."

"But just about. Be honest. You could walk out of here right now and have someone in your bed within two hours, Thanksgiving or not, and you wouldn't even have to know her name."

"Look, is there a point in this?"

"The point is, you didn't need Kathy physically, and you knew you weren't going to get me under any circumstances. And you knew I was going to eventually forgive you. So your clumsy attempt to make up was based in a real regret for what you'd done. Because you really cared."

Kelden sighed as he folded and hung up the dish towel. "I wish I could believe you. But I know myself too well."

"No, you don't. You know what you want to know,

because you're intent on punishing yourself, and you're not going to admit to any good about yourself. Look at David."

"What about him?"

"You've got no ulterior sexual motives with him, right? The only physical thing you were getting out of your relationship with him was a place to stay. And you've got a decent apartment now. Yet, this rift between you is tearing you apart. And don't try to shrug it off. You were ready to die not too long ago. You care, Kel, maybe more than you know."

Kelden leaned against the sink and stared at the floor. "Let's assume," he said slowly, "just for the sake of the argument, that you're right. What do I do about it?"

"Ultimately? Give your life to God. I know," she waved aside his protests, "you're not ready for that yet, if ever. More's the pity. It will come down to that, whether you believe it or not. But for now, the best thing you can do for yourself is make peace with Laurie and David. Or at least David. Laurie's probably not ready to face something like that. And you don't have to approve or agree with anything David's doing. But as long as you have a grudge against him, and you know he has one against you, you're never going to have any peace. Either of you."

Kelden expelled a noisy breath and nodded. "I'll think about it."

"All right," Paige said slowly. "I'll accept that. Now -" she suddenly became briskness and industry "- I'd love to have you stay and chat, but I really must get to work on that project. Unless you want to stay and talk to me while I paint?"

Kelden smiled. "The offer is tempting. I'd really like to see you in action sometime. But I really should go. Coffee after rehearsal?"

"Of course." She walked him to the door, and they said their goodnights. As she was shutting it, she suddenly thought of something and turned back. "Kel, you forgot your -!" But he was gone. So she set aside his casserole dish and sauce bowl where she would remember them on Monday.



Kelden . . . gripped Tony's hand. Tony altered the greeting to a hug, and Kelden was so glad to see him he didn't even flinch. It wasn't until after it was broken that he suddenly remembered his disturbing thoughts of a few weeks ago.

*Antonio Garza
Kelden Scott*

Chapter 4

The first real snow of the season fell Friday. Light, but wet, it mixed with mud and was churned into a dark slush by the time Kelden left work. In his mind, it was a dire omen. He had decided to see David.

He went first to the offices of Cervenka Construction. David would likely have given his employees the day after Thanksgiving off while he worked by himself, but the Van Duyn Building was locked and no lights showed in the office windows. He could see a glimmer in one of the Penthouse windows, but he didn't want to see Michael. He wasn't sure he was ready for that. On the other hand, he didn't want to go to the house and run into him there. He hesitated, then moved his car around the corner and came back and rang the bell. After a few moments, a male voice answered. He couldn't remember what Michael's voice sounded like, but he was certain this wasn't David's. He hurried away before anyone could look out a window and spot him, feeling like a teenager pulling a Halloween prank.

Daylight was quickly fleeing the overcast sky when he pulled into David's driveway. The garage door was closed, but a light glowed through the front curtains. Kelden stared at the house. He was reluctant to leave the warm car and face the chill on the way to – and possibly at – the door, but he didn't want to lurk and risk Michael showing up. They apparently still maintained separate residences; beyond that, he could only wonder what their arrangements might be. He forced himself out of the car before his speculations could become graphic.

David answered the door with a grin, exclaiming, “You didn't forget your key again?” before he saw who it was and

froze.

Kelden smiled. "No," he replied lightly, "I believe I left mine on the counter."

David blinked, then stepped back. "Come in," he said quietly.

Kelden stepped in. David took his coat and hung it in the hall closet while Kelden studied him. He'd always seen David in jeans or cutoffs and a white T-shirt or light, striped sport shirt, when he wore a shirt at all. He was now dressed in a bright turquoise tank top and thin cotton balloon pants in vivid patterns of turquoise, pink, lilac, and green. He wondered if this was Michael's influence. It suited him well.

"You're looking good," Kelden told him, truthfully.

"Thank you."

"I know." Kelden smiled wryly. "I look like shit."

"You look like you could use some sleep," David admitted. "And some time with the weights."

"You're probably right. But I don't have anyone around to nag me any more."

There was an awkward silence, then David said, "Come in. Sit down. Want a beer?"

"No, thanks." Kelden took a chair. "I'm trying to quit."

"Good for you." David sat across the room.

"Anyway, you're obviously expecting someone else. I don't think he'd be too happy to see me."

"I didn't know the two of you'd met."

"We ran into each other by chance a couple weeks ago. We didn't hit it off too well."

David started and touched his cheek. "You mean -?"

"Yeah."

David shook his head. "He told me he'd slipped in the shower. I should've known."

Another uncomfortable silence followed. Kelden wished he hadn't brought up Michael.

"So," David said finally. "What can I do for you?"

Kelden took a deep breath. "Aah - have you heard from Tony?" *Damned coward!* he yelled silently at himself.

"No. I tried a couple times, but he never called back. You?"

"No."

That diversion died. This was going to be every bit as hard as Kelden had feared.

This time David broke the silence. "So, how's it going?"

"Okay, I guess."

"I heard about Laurie. I'm sorry."

"That's right, you've done business with her. Thank you."

"You're welcome. How is she?"

"I don't know. I haven't been to see her."

"I thought you two were close?"

"It's - kind of complicated. I just - it wouldn't be a good idea. Not for a while, anyway."

"Were you one of the ones that attacked her?"

"No. But I guess I was involved, at least indirectly. Anyway, it's something I have to work out for myself."

David's lips twitched. "In other words, mind my own business. Fair enough. How's Paige? Or is that none of my business, too?"

Kelden suppressed a flash of irritation. "She's fine. I had Thanksgiving dinner with her. She's the one who. . . ."

"Who what?"

Kelden took a deep breath. He was actually beginning to fear David, and he didn't like it. He had to regain control, fast, or God knew what might happen. "Who encouraged me to come talk to you."

David nodded. "I had a feeling it was something like that. Did you know she and Michael are friends? He speaks highly of her and her good sense. So she thinks we should sit down and talk? Okay. Talk."

Kelden flushed. He suddenly wished he'd taken David up on that beer. He shifted in his chair, hunched forward, and clamped his hands between his knees. He simply couldn't get comfortable. He felt a stab of resentment toward David, who lounged back on the couch, right ankle on left knee, arm sprawled along the back. He didn't notice that David's relaxed attitude was being rigidly maintained. "I've been doing a lot of thinking lately," Kelden began,

abruptly, not looking at David. "By myself." David remained perfectly still, so Kelden continued. "About you. And me. And what you told me. About yourself, you know? And - well. . . ." He ran his hand over his face and finally looked David in the eye. "I'm sorry. For the way I acted. You trusted me, and I let you down. I was wrong." He thought of Paige's words. "Forgive me."

David stared at him, saying nothing, not even blinking. Finally, Kelden said, "David? Did you hear me?"

"I heard you."

"And?"

David finally moved, lowering his arm and drawing both feet under him. "I just wish I knew whether to believe you."

"What do you mean? You don't think I came here and reopened everything just to lie to you?"

David shook his head. "No, no. I believe you're sorry, and as far as that goes, of course I forgive you. I just wonder about some things."

"Like what?"

"Were you wanting to renew our friendship?"

"I don't know," hedged Kelden.

David frowned. "We talked about games. Don't do it now."

Kelden's jaw clenched. He took a slow, deep breath, then nodded. "Okay. No games. Yes, I've missed talking to you; I've missed sharing our lives. I miss our friendship. Would I like that back? In a moment! Do I think it's possible? I really don't know."

David nodded. "You say you've done a lot of thinking. What do you think of homosexuality?"

Kelden closed his eyes. *How can I put these last weeks into a few sentences*, he thought. *How can I express with confidence things I have no confidence about?* "I don't know," he sighed. "Everything I thought I believed is upside down and backwards now. I don't know what to think any more. I do know it's not what I used to think and never can be again."

David gave another ghost-smile. "Well, that's clear as mud. All right. Let's try this: I'm gay. Can you accept that?"

"Yes. I think so. Yes."

"You *think* so? Or you do?"

"I do."

"Okay, then. Can you believe that I'm not out to seduce or rape you, and that I never was?"

"Yes."

"Will you accept Michael as my legitimate partner?"

Kelden hesitated. David was watching him keenly. The silence stretched, too long. David sank back with a slow, silent sigh, and Kelden knew he'd answered him. His heart sank. "Why is it so important to you?" he cried.

David cocked his head and chuckled dryly. "Maybe you better ask yourself the same thing." He unfolded himself and stood. "Look, Michael should've been here twenty minutes ago. He's almost never late. You've already pushed your luck, so you better take off if you don't want to run into him."

Kelden stood slowly. "What about us?"

"Kel, I gotta admire you for coming here and apologizing like that. I hope, some day, we can work out the rest of it. But Michael's an important part of my life, and if you can't accept that, I don't see how we can hope to regain anything, at least not for real." He brought out his coat. "I really am glad you came, though. I've been worried about you."

Kelden nodded numbly. "Thanks," he mumbled.

David walked him to the door. "Kel, I miss you, too. But I can't just turn my back on my life, or on Michael. You mean a lot to me, but so does he. I don't want to have to choose between you, but if you force it, I can't pretend I'm not what I am."

"I understand," Kelden responded automatically. "Maybe some day."

"Yeah." David opened the door. "Maybe. Take care of yourself. And for God's sake, get some sleep!"

"I'll try." Kelden stood on the porch and blinked at the houses across the street. Full dark had fallen as they'd talked. It had begun to snow again, and the lighted windows through the skittering flakes seemed warmer and

safer and more normal than ever. "David?" he said abruptly.

"Yeah?"

"What about them?" He gestured to the neighborhood. "Aren't you pretending not to be what you are with them?"

David didn't answer. Kelden looked at him a long moment, then turned and walked down the stairs and out to his car. As he drove off, he saw David still standing in the doorway. He didn't notice the car down the street that pulled away from the curb and then entered David's driveway.

"Well," he said aloud as he steered carefully down the slick streets, "so much for reconciliation. I tried, Paige, I really tried. But I just don't want anything to do with Michael. I can't help it; I just don't. Is that so bad?" For a moment, at one intersection, he hesitated. It would be so easy just to turn left and head for a bar. He turned right and drove to his apartment. He would not allow himself to be so easily defeated again.

When he got to the house, he paused to check the mail, and then slowly climbed the steps. Halfway up, he heard the front door open and shut; then, as he slid the key into the lock on his door, he heard soft footsteps on the stairs. *I don't really want to talk to the neighbors*, he thought, and pretended not to hear anything. Then, behind him, a voice cried, "*¡Hola! ¡Amigo! ¿Dónde puedo encontrar una buena mujer por aquí?*"

Kelden caught his breath, and his heart stumbled. Now was the test. He paused just long enough to be sure he knew what he wanted to say, then turned. "*Todo depende*," he replied slowly, "*para qué la quieres*."

Tony gaped at him, then exploded. "*Hombre, ¿Desde cuando hablar español?*"

Kelden grinned. "Since right after you left. I've been taking a Spanish class two nights a week."

"Damn! Now how am I gonna drive you *loco*?"

Kelden shrugged. "I guess you'll just have to learn Croatian. C'mere!" He stepped forward suddenly and gripped Tony's hand. Tony altered the greeting to a hug,

and Kelden was so glad to see him he didn't even flinch, and it wasn't until after it was broken that he suddenly remembered his disturbing thoughts of a few weeks ago. He forced them from his mind and said, "Come in! Come in! God, but it's good to see you!"

"*Gracias*, man. You, too. But what the hell are you doing *here*?"

"Long story." Kelden put him off as he settled him on the couch and got him a Coke. "How'd you find me? We haven't heard from you in weeks!"

"I have not talked to anyone in weeks. Except Paige, tonight. She told me you had moved. And she said she would give you back your bowls Monday night. You know, it figures. I am gone nearly five months, and when I come home, I am made a messenger!"

Kelden laughed. "But what happened to you, man? Last we heard, the tour was doing phenomenally well, and then you disappeared. Last time I checked Billboard, some band called Fallen Angel was opening for Alter Bridge."

Tony nodded. "They are one hot group. They made us look like a high school garage band."

"Is that why you guys were given the boot?"

"No, no, man! They liked us, would have kept us, but our contract was only through the end of September, when Fallen Angel was available."

"I didn't know that was the deal."

"We did not know it, too, until we got out there. Our agent was almost as new to the business as we were. He was a friend of Mark's, and we were his first act, and he just simply forgot to tell us."

"Man, what a rip!"

"No, it was okay. He made up for it by getting us a recording contract. We went straight from the road into the studio, and a month later, we had our first and last album."

"Last album?"

"*Sí*. Glass Comet *ésta muerto*."

"What happened?"

"Mark and Blade happened. I could not keep Mark straight. He kept getting the shit from other musicians and

techs and roadies and even the fans. I only could make sure he functioned on the stage. I did not know he was playing mostly while trashed until we were in the studio. He does not even remember the sessions. I still do not know how he was so good."

"Is he all right?"

"*Sí*, he is now. But the day after we finished in the studio he went *loco*. He partied all weekend in about a dozen different places. I caught up with him Sunday night, but I was too late. He collapsed about an hour later. I do not know why he did not die. I got him to a hospital and stayed with him for ten days. His heart stopped beating twice on the first day, and they said if he survived, his mind, it would be burned out. But he came out of it without too much damage. I think he will have some permanent memory loss, and sometimes he has a hard time speaking, but when I left he was practicing and sounding as good as ever."

"But that's great! Why break up Glass Comet?"

"*¡Tú debes estar bromeando!* I do not want to babysit him the rest of my life! He has promised to stay clean, but I do not think it will last. Anyway, he has had offers from other bands, including Fallen Angel, and I do not think he wants to stay with a group just out of the bars. Especially after Blade."

"What happened to Blade?"

Tony shrugged. "*No sabemos*. He disappeared - pffft! - four days after Mark was admitted, with only his cut of the tour profits and the clothes he was wearing."

"You've got no clue where he is? Or if he's even alive?"

"*No tengo la menor idea*. He could have walked into the sea, or he could be living in the Sierra Nevadas. He did not say anything to anyone. He just went."

Kelden shook his head. He rather envied Blade. "What's everybody gonna do?"

Tony waved his hand. "Mark, he will probably go with Fallen Angel and become rich and famous, if he lives long enough. Val, she is looking for another band who needs a drummer. She has broken up with Silk, who wants to be a studio musician. Zach wants to find out what happened to

Blade. And me, I will be a great Mexican architect and will play my keyboards at weddings and parties. And the label will release the album in about a month and will hope enough people want to buy the only release of a fading memory that they will break even on us."

"Wow. Well, if Mark does become rich and famous, maybe the album will be a collector's item."

"Si. No doubt."

"Anyway, I'm sorry it turned out so bad."

Tony shrugged again. "*Estas cosas pasan algunas veces*. Hey, we got a hell of a lot farther than most bands. I will never forget it, but it is time to move on. Now you have my story, you tell me your long one."

"Well, I don't really know where to start," Kelden hedged.

"The last time I talked to David, he said you had moved out, but he did not know where. I asked why; he said it was not important and we could talk when I got back. I asked Paige, and she said I should talk to you. I am talking to you. What happened?"

Kelden hesitated. David had asked him not to tell anyone he was gay. Paige had guessed - or had that "special knowledge", or whatever - but how could he say anything to Tony without breaking his promise? And even if he hadn't promised, did he have the right to say anything that might drive a wedge between David and Tony? Especially since they had to work together? "I don't know," he said slowly. "It's awfully personal. I accidentally discovered he had some - beliefs - that I didn't agree with, but I can't really say anything more. Anyway, the problem is complicated - I'm not even sure I can explain it clearly."

"Ah. *Yo comprendo*." Tony nodded calmly. "But what is to explain? It all, to me, is very clear - you cannot accept homosexuality."

Kelden's jaw dropped. "How did you - you know about - about -"

"About David being gay? *Seguro*. I told you he let me live in the Penthouse rent-free for six months after it was finished, ¿s? Well, after that, I lived there another six

months with him as his lover."

Kelden stared at Tony's grin, trying to catch his emotional breath. Finally he spluttered, "Am I the only person in Fell Park who *isn't* gay? Or wasn't at some time?"

Tony laughed. "No, no! We really are a minority, just like everywhere else. Most of the people you work with, or pass on the street – or take to your bed – are straight. In fact, most of the people in this town will never knowingly meet one of us. But you became close to David, and me, and then Paige. You did not know it, *amigo*, but you have become part of the fringe of the underground gay and lesbian community here."

Kelden shook his head, bemused. "A gay and lesbian community? In Fell Park?"

"¡Seguro! It is not all that unusual. It is just more readily accepted in places like San Francisco and New York City and Chicago. We have to hide a little more around here, but we are here. Anyway, there is a pretty good chance the man who built this town was gay."

"You're shitting me!"

"No way, man. Of course, there is no proof – homosexuality was never mentioned in public, and hardly ever even in diaries. You know Tchaikovsky never openly acknowledged his homosexuality, even in his private papers, ¿sí? But it is clear from clues in his writings and his history? Well, it is the same for Isaac Washburn."

Kelden snorted and rubbed his beard. "Well, if you say so. But what about you? Are you bisexual, or are you putting on an act, too?"

"¿Qué?"

"I mean, like David."

"Ah. *Está bien. Yo comprendo*. Do not be too harsh on him. When a rock musician is gay, the people, they say, 'so what?'. And if he is a foreigner, well what do you expect – they are all a little *loco*, ¿sí? But someone like David – if he is different, they will hate him, and he will starve."

"Oh, come on! This is the new millennium, for God's sake! People aren't so uptight about that any more!"

"You do not think so? Look around. This place, it does

not look to me like Brisbane."

"Hell, that was different!"

"*Si*, it always is." Kelden said nothing, so Tony continued. "Anyway, *si*, I am bisexual. But I keep my gay side quiet for the sake of David, because I do not want to attract to him a lot of attention." He sat back and studied Kelden, who remained silent, staring at the floor. "So," he finished quietly, "you know all about me, now. But what about you? And where do I stand? Do I join your list of people to avoid?"

Kelden forced himself to look at Tony. Where *did* they stand? He remembered his burst of desire for him. Suddenly, it no longer seemed quite so unthinkable, and he felt fear. Just where were they headed? And could he control it? He began to shake his head, very slowly. "No," he whispered. Then, louder, "No. I don't have a list like that any more." *Except, maybe, for Michael*, he thought.

"I am glad to hear that. We are, then, still friends?"

"Yes." *God help me, I will dare to try!*

"And David?"

Kelden sighed. "I've tried. I really have. I was over there earlier tonight, trying to talk to him. The problem isn't his homosexuality. I'm not sure it ever really was, deep down - there was some homophobia, yes, but mostly it was a betrayal thing, and I think I've resolved that. The problem is Michael Bachman. I don't like him very much, I don't think he likes me, and I don't like their relationship. But David's attitude is I have to accept Michael as his lover if I expect to be his friend." He shrugged and spread his hands. "So, there you are."

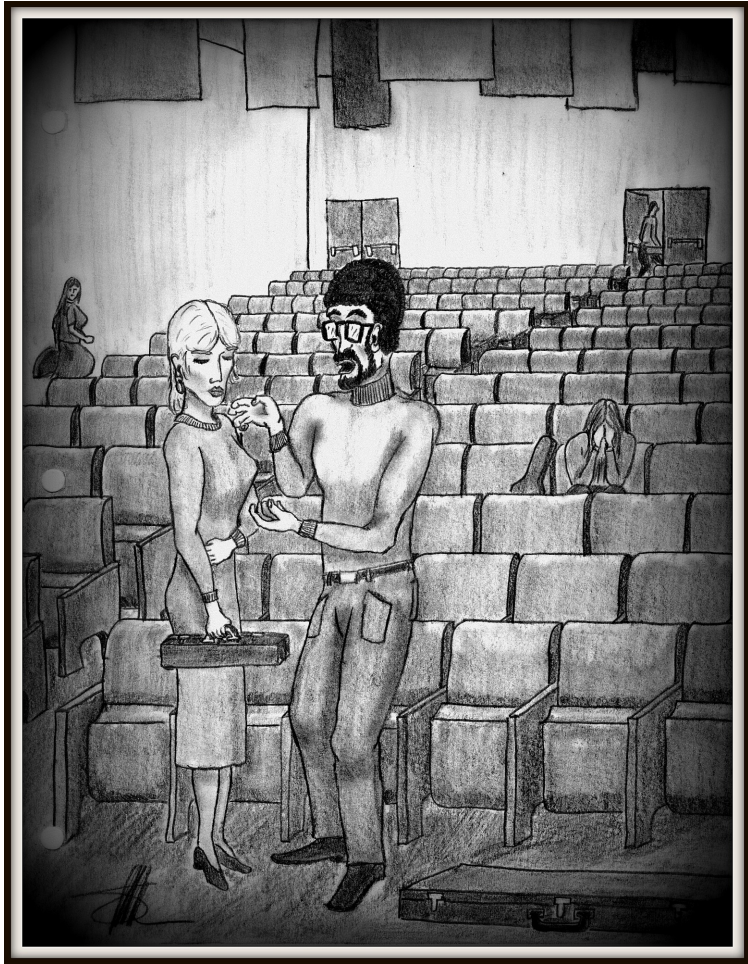
Tony nodded. "I will do my best to smooth the waters for you. But I do not promise you anything. If David is willing to let someone get that close to him, he must be very special. As you were." He suddenly yawned. "Ah! *¡Perdón!* I have not yet caught up with myself!" He stood. "I think, perhaps, I will need to sleep for a week! *Buenos noches, amigo.*"

"*Buenos noches*," Kelden walked him to the door. "*Me alegras que hayas regresado.* There were a lot of times I

needed to talk to you."

"Me alegra también, estar de regreso. Although I do not think I will ever get used to you speaking Spanish!" Tony clasped his hand, then, as he did at their first dinner party, swept him into an impulsive hug. Though startled, this time Kelden responded cautiously. Then Tony stepped back. *"¡Lo siento, man!"* he exclaimed. "I should not have done that, *quizás?*"

Kelden smiled. "It's all right," he said. "Good night." But he trembled as he closed the door.



“ . . . Kathy, I'm truly sorry for what I said. It was crude and cruel and – and unforgivable. . . . I don't even know if we can still be friends. But I hope you can at least stop hating me.”

*Foreground: Kathy Baylor
Kelden Scott*

Middleground: Paige Santori (praying)

Background: Unidentified orchestra members

Chapter 5

Kelden called Colleen early Saturday, explaining that he needed to get away for a bit. Fortunately, she was free that afternoon and evening and most of Sunday. She joked that she'd known it was just a matter of time before bucolic bliss bored the snot out of him, but she sensed he really didn't want to discuss the details. However, she wasn't at all shy about her own life – she was involved with Daryl Crown, their parents' investment counselor, who had inherited the account on his father's retirement. They'd been dating seriously for two months, and he was to move in with her Sunday evening. She enthusiastically agreed not to tell their parents Kelden was in town, putting him up in her second bedroom again. He brought a full repayment of her loan, plus the agreed-upon interest, then treated her to a Steppenwolf production followed by a late dinner on the lakefront. On Sunday he fixed dinner for her and Daryl, then drove back down.

The time away left him feeling so good that Monday night he stopped Kathy on her way out of rehearsal.

“Can we talk?”

Kathy refused to look at him. “We have nothing to talk about.”

“Just a few minutes. I promise. In public – here, Java Joe's, wherever you'd feel comfortable.”

Kathy looked past him. Paige was watching closely from a distance. Kathy flashed a plea at her and Paige gave a slight nod. Reassured, Kathy turned to Kelden.

“All right, Kel,” she said. “A few minutes. Here.” She led him to a pair of first-row seats in the auditorium. Paige settled into another several rows behind them.

When the moment arrived, Kelden felt less sure of

himself. They sat in uncomfortable silence until Kathy said, "Well? You wanted to talk."

"Ah . . . yes." Kelden shifted. "Well . . . you're looking good."

Kathy gathered her flute and music with a sigh. "Look," she said as she stood, "I don't have the time or desire for games."

"Wait!" Kelden jumped up and seized her arm. She tensed. "All right! No games!" She glared at his hand, and he released her. "No games," he repeated a little more softly. "Just listen."

"All right. I'm listening."

"Kathy . . . ah" He took a deep breath. "It's about Halloween. Well, it's about before that, too, but especially Halloween." He stopped.

"Go on."

"Paige said you refused those pictures because you felt I was trying to buy your forgiveness?" She nodded; if she was confused, she gave no sign. "Well, I guess I did try to bribe you. But I won't do that this time. I don't know how to convince you I'm sincere. I'm – not sure I can trust myself any more. But I mean this as much as I've ever meant anything. More." He almost, but not quite, placed his hands on her shoulders. "Kathy, I'm truly sorry for what I said. It was crude and cruel and – and unforgivable. And I'm sorry for the way I treated and used you. I've been very selfish, something I've only recently realized and I'm not very proud of. I've used a lot of people, mostly women. I'm sorry you were one of them. You deserve better. I'm – I don't expect you to allow me to get as close as before. I don't even know if we can still be friends. But I hope you can at least stop hating me." His courage drained, he stepped back and waited.

Kathy glanced toward where Paige sat, eyes closed and lips fluttering. Then she nodded. "Yes," she said, "I'll forgive you. I don't know if we can be friends, either, but I'm tired of hating you. And I do respect you for coming to me."

She offered her hand, and Kelden took it. "Thank you,"

he said, with an odd mixture of surprise, relief, gratitude, and triumph.

"You're welcome. I've got to go now."

"Of course. See you next week?"

She nodded and smiled, then hurried away. Paige heard her coming and opened her eyes and stood. As the two of them talked quietly, Kelden gathered his own belongings and glanced around. Only a handful of musicians remained in the auditorium, most trying hard to look like they weren't the least bit curious how this ill-concealed affair was playing itself out.

"Kel?"

"Huh?" Kelden started; he hadn't heard Paige come up behind him.

"You left these last week." She handed him the bowls.

"Oh! Thanks! I hadn't even noticed they were missing 'til Tony mentioned them."

She smiled. "Maybe I shouldn't've said anything - I could've gotten a couple of free bowls." Then she turned serious. "Kel, at the risk of sounding like your mother, I'm proud of you. Kathy told me you'd made a simple, sincere apology, no strings attached. I know that was hard for you."

"Thanks. Actually, my mother would never have said that. Incidentally, I hope you notice that God had nothing to do with this."

"Don't be too sure," she grinned. "Seems you're Kathy's first answered prayer since becoming a Christian."

"What? Damn! But this was my idea!"

"Was it? Want to discuss it over coffee?"

"Not really," he admitted. "I'm not up for theological arguments tonight. Anyway, I'm meeting Tony. But you can have another crack at converting me on Friday, if you want."

"Java Joe's, eight o'clock?"

"Perfect. See you then." He turned to leave.

"Kel?"

"Yeah?" He turned back.

She was staring at him. "Be careful."

"Of what?"

"I'm - not sure," she confessed. "I just feel like - something's coming."

He grinned. "I'll be all right. But I think you'd better get your 'gift' fine-tuned. See you Friday." He left, missing her look of exasperation.

Tony had agreed to do a solo set at Bricker's, and Kelden was to meet him afterwards. The conversations with Kathy and Paige had delayed him longer than he'd expected; Tony was already waiting outside, stamping his feet and blowing on his hands and jealously guarding his keyboards against an almost empty street. Kelden pulled up and leapt out to help him load his equipment.

"When are you going to break down and get your own car," Kelden complained as he tried sliding the MIDI in from another angle.

"When I find one worth stealing, man!" Tony retorted.

The MIDI surrendered grudgingly, leaving only the stands. In a burst of creativity, Kelden jammed one into the trunk; Tony would have to hold the others. "No amps or speakers?"

"Bricker let me use his. When you said you would give me a ride home, I knew I could not fit my own into your Spyder. It is very cute, but there is a reason musicians travel in buses."

"I thought it was because they like to snort diesel fumes." Kelden pulled away from the curb. "How was the gig?"

Tony shrugged. "You saw how I was standing there, *solitario*, no adoring fans. I know it is a Monday night, but still, it was not Glass Comet. I played for them *mi corazon*. They did not ignore me, but they were there for something - *diferente*. Bricker, he wants me to come back on a weekend, but I do not think I will play there again."

"You're not giving up, are you? I know you want to focus on your architecture, but you can't spend all your talent on weddings and Bar Mitzvahs!"

Tony laughed. "No, I do not want to lose it all. But I think it is time to travel another road. I liked playing with Glass Comet. I will always like the heavy metal and rock

music. But I am also interested in trying your friend's Concertino. We can find another guitarist. *Yo tengo la creencia*. And I have a few ideas of my own for your bassoon and my keyboards, some of the *Impresionismo Nuevo* that you like so much. But this part of my life, *se terminó*."

Kelden was silent a moment, then said, "I'll miss it."

"*Sí. Yo también.*"

Kelden pulled into a parking lot. "You want a cup of coffee? I'm buying."

"*Sí*. That would be good."

Java Joe's was filled with students poring over books in preparation for final exams while the counter attendants poured the coffee that would keep them awake. Kelden and Tony were fortunate to find a small table in an isolated back corner newly abandoned by a student who could no longer bear differential equations and craved a dose of Trevor Noah to restore her perspective. Kelden held their prize while Tony collected their orders.

They sipped their coffees in silence for a bit, listening to the murmur of voices, the rustle of pages, and the gentle guitar music on the speakers. Then Kelden looked intently at Tony and, in tones that wouldn't be overheard, said, "I want to ask you something."

"Anything, man."

"Why did you decide to become bisexual?"

Tony was neither startled nor offended. "You mean, instead of becoming a Republican?"

"Huh?"

Tony smiled and sat back. "I did not 'decide' to 'become' anything. I just was."

"What do you mean? Like, you were born bisexual?"

"I think, *quizás*, you could say that." Tony frowned and scratched his chin. "I knew very early that I was different. Little kids, of course, they do not know sex, but when I was old enough, after we moved from Mexico to Chicago, and my *compadres* were talking about the girls, I did not understand why they could not see it was not just the girls that were *atractiva*. I did not say anything, because I had already learned such feelings were not acceptable from

hearing them talk about other people. My family, too. They were the very strict Catholics. *Mi padre*, he was *muy molesto* when he heard a cousin was gay. And not just because of his religion. He said, 'It is hard enough to be a wetback in this land of opportunity without being a wetback queer'. And that was one of the nicer things he said. Me, I was very confused and very guilty and I could not understand why anything that seemed so natural could be so wrong, but I did not tell anyone about my feelings.

"I was going to a Catholic boys' school, but our parish, it was not rich, so I had to go to a public high school. That was confusing enough, to be every day with others who I had been taught were going to *infierno*, and who had been taught the same thing about us. But for the first time, I was with the girls as well as the boys, and I found out that I really did like them, too. That made it easier to act like everyone else, so I dated the girls and never said anything about the other, until the summer after my second year, when I started to work at Casa del Oro. I was a busboy, and one of the waiters was gay. I asked him about it, and myself, and he became my first male lover. We had to keep it *como una tumba* because I was underage. I also had a girlfriend, and I started sleeping with her at the same time, so I was *muy ocupado* the rest of high school. Then I came down here and those *relaciones* ended. And then I met David and was with him until he became afraid we were *demasiado obvio*, living and working together. And now I am with Carla, a girl I met before the tour."

"Just the four?"

"*Si*. You are at your most vulnerable when you are sexually intimate, and I do not wish to be vulnerable to too many people."

"This Carla – does she know you're bi?"

"*¡Seguro!* I will not have the relationship that is based on such secrets! She knows I had a male lover before her and will probably have another after her."

"And she doesn't mind?"

"As long as she is the only one in my life right now, and we are careful always to use the protection, she is

content. *¡Dios mio!* The time! I have a drafting final tomorrow morning!"

They left the table to a co-ed with a mountain of books and a look of desperation. They drove to Tony's apartment. It was small, but immaculate, which didn't surprise Kelden. What did was the lack of any feminine touch; apparently, he and Carla weren't living together. He helped Tony stow his equipment, then left.

The following night, after Kelden returned from class, Tony came over to help him study for a Spanish final on Thursday. Tony drilled him mercilessly, insisting they speak nothing but Spanish from the moment he walked in. They worked intensively for an hour and a half, when Kelden collapsed on the couch, crying, "*¡Suficiente! ¡No más!* My brain just turned into guacamole!"

"*¡Bueno!*" cried Tony. "Bring out the tortilla chips! You are really doing *muy bien, mi amigo.*"

"*Gracias.* You want a Coke?"

"*Si. Por favor.*"

Kelden brought out two Cokes – with a large bag of tortilla chips. Tony laughed and sipped his drink. It was pure cola. "So, how long you been sober, man?" he asked.

Kelden thought. "A little over a week. Celibate, too."

Tony raised his glass. "*¡Felicitaciones!*"

"*Gracias.*" Kelden smiled crookedly. "I wish I could say it was all due to my strength of character. I'd especially love to say that to Paige. But I think it's more because I've just been too busy lately."

Tony shrugged. "Whatever works, man. But what is the problem with Paige?"

"It's not really a problem, I guess. I say I can control myself, she insists I need God."

"Ah, *si.* I have talked to her, too. She is an amazing woman; it is too bad she has allowed the *gente religiosa* to control her."

"Religious people? Controlling *Paige*? Come on! That's why she left home! Anyway, I can't see her allowing anyone to control her!"

"Ah, but these *Cristianos*, they are subtle. They come

with their smiles and their talk of *el amor de Dios*, and they twist your mind and they steal your freedom and they send you *al infierno* with *alegría* if you resist them." Tony spoke lightly, but he couldn't quite hide the fire in his eyes or the acid in his voice.

"Come on, Tony. They can't be that bad!"

"You do not think so? Then you have not seen them in action, *mi amigo*. I told you about my first male lover, at Casa del Oro? He was the best waiter there. But he was fired three months after I left, because *los Cristianos*, they found out about him and would not be served by *una abominación*."

"They actually called him that?"

"Oh, not to his face. They had not *los cojones* for that. But our boss, he got many letters from many people who said they were decent and God-fearing and they would not visit an establishment that would allow such *perversión*. And then the accused him of spitting in their food to give them AIDS. So - pfft! - he is gone. And what is funny, his name was Jesús."

"He couldn't sue them, or something?"

"He did not want to sue our boss for discrimination, so he let it pass. And these brave *Cristianos* - they never signed their names."

"What happened to him?"

"*Muerta*. A year ago. Of AIDS."

Tony shrugged. "He died with dignity, with his friends by his side. A lot of people came to his funeral, including many customers who did not want him fired. But I will tell you something. Some of his family, they were the fundamentalist Christians, and they would not come to see him buried. Some who did, the told us Jesús did not have to die, that the gays killed him, and they would burn forever with him. And then, when I come back here from the funeral, there is a man on campus, preaching on the quad, screaming that AIDS is God's judgment on gays, that He is nauseated by our sinful lives and wishes to wipe us from His holy sight unless we repent. Never have I wanted so much to kill someone!"

"What did you do?"

"I went to David and he let me scream for a while myself. Then Glass Comet played in Bloomington and I got drunk and played the keys *como un diable* and came back here and slept for twelve hours. And then the preacher was gone, and I did not have to kill anyone."

Kelden sighed. "Well, I can't believe Paige would ever be like that."

Tony shook his head. "I do not think so, too, but I do not wish to find out. So I do not run from her, but I do not talk to her about religion."

"But what about you? Aren't you afraid of AIDS?"

"Oh, *si, seguro*. And of cancer and drunk drivers. But I am careful. I am tested every six months, and I am clean. I have only one partner at a time, and we use the protection."

"But still - the risk! And they say condoms don't offer that much protection!"

"I do not know what 'they' say. But the risk, it is greater for you, *amigo*, that it is for me. How many women have you had? Do you know their backgrounds? Are you their only partner? How many partners did their partners have? How many were bisexual? Did they all wear condoms? Were you always sober enough to remember to wear one? When you sleep with someone, it is like you are sleeping with everyone they have. You could receive the virus through three or four generations of partners, from someone you have never met and probably never will meet."

"Jeez!" Kelden was shaken.

"¿Entiendes? AIDS is not a gay disease. It is not the judgment of God on homosexuals. The 'decent, God-fearing' *Cristianos* have died of AIDS, too. It is everyone's disease! Now, *vamos*, *amigo*. You have much more studying to do."

On Wednesday, they met at Tony's apartment to help him prepare for an accounting final. They worked diligently until Tony begged for mercy, threatening to bludgeon Kelden with a calculator. Kelden produced raisin muffins

he'd picked up at Java Joe's on the way over, and while Tony made coffee, commented, "You looked pretty pissed when I got here. What's going on?"

Tony snorted. "Some more *amor Cristiano*. I did not have classes today, so I talked David into giving me the day off to take Carla ice skating in McClendon Park. There was a church group there. They were talking about Jesus. I ignored them until I heard one of the women say, 'You did not let your son go to the pavilion bathroom alone? That is a gay hangout!' As if to be gay is to be a child molester! Or the only way a gay person can start a relationship is in the *baños públicos*!"

Kelden grinned at Tony's indignation. "You know, I was approached once in a john. Some guy kept trying to look into the stall I was in. I finally announced I was going to come out swinging. He left immediately." Tony snorted. Kelden continued. "Anyway, you gotta admit, the urinals are a good place to check out - well -"

"The quality of the merchandise?" Tony snapped. "¿Estás loco? That is not *un mercado*, for inspecting the different cuts of meat!"

"Are you saying that never happens?"

"Are you saying you do that?"

"I'm not saying that. I'm just asking."

Tony struggled with himself, then admitted, "No. *Tu tienes la razón*. Gays and lesbians like to look at *los bonitos cuerpos*, just like heteros. But - but - *¡Es lo que yo trato de dícerte, lo mismo que tú estás diciéndolo!*"

"Whoa! Slow down! What do you mean - uh - what I said is what you said? What did I say?" Tony grimaced and held up his hand, and Kelden grinned. "My God! He's at a loss for words!"

"Only for the English ones! *Bueno*. You are right, some gays and lesbians, they try to make the connections wherever they can. They want sex for the sake of sex, and if it is with many different people, *mucho mejor*. They change the partners *frecuéntemente*, and do not get very close to any of them. But what is different from what many heteros do?" If Tony noticed Kelden's wince, he was either too polite

or too distracted to comment. "Then there are those who are simply curious. They will try anything one time, or maybe two, to see what it is like. Just like many heteros, *sí*? But there are many more, *mi amigo*, just like the heteros, who know that sex is to express something *mucho más profundo*. These people, they do not want to take to bed everyone they see. They want one partner, *nuestra relación*, based upon the trust and affection. I do not think even *los Cristianos* can say they are always like that. What do you think? Can *los Cristianos* do better than that?"

"Don't ask me, man! I'm one of those flaming heathens who can't seem to get enough sex! What do I know about either God or monogamy?"

"Ha! *¡Así es! ¡Lo olvidé!* My head has in it too much accounting!"

"Unfortunately, it needs more."

"You open up that book, and I will cut from you your heart!"

Kelden shrugged. "Haven't you heard? I'm already a heartless bastard. A sleepy heartless bastard. And we've got a long way to go. You're a great architect and a hell of a musician, but you're the lousiest damned accountant I've ever met."

"So David will handle all the books. *Bien, bien, vamenos.*"

Thursday was a long day for Kelden. He had to nurse AgriState's system through a glitch caused by the hasty rearrangements of two weeks before and barely made his class. He hadn't had time to study since Tuesday, which wouldn't have been a problem in the past, but he'd accelerated through the earlier months into more complex work, only to have his life crumble. For the first time since he'd started learning Spanish, he felt totally unprepared. He sweated his way through the exam, and went home immediately after to collapse in bed, certain of defeat.

Friday was equally hectic; Kelden worked overtime to track down the glitch he'd caused the day before in trying to correct the previous glitch. He corrected the new one, but could only hope that he hadn't spawned yet another

that would haunt him on Monday and reproduce even more. He had a sudden, mad vision of crippled computer programs lined up on crutches and stretchers outside his door, all claiming to be his illegitimate offspring. He knew then he had to leave.

By the time he'd driven to his apartment in a light snow, checked his email and texts and showered, it was close to seven. He was just trying to decide whether to shop for groceries, hit a fast food joint, or force some delivery driver to brave the elements, when he remembered that he'd promised to meet Paige for coffee. He checked his phone. He was supposed to be there in an hour. He made a quick decision and dialed her number.

"What would you say to a pizza," he asked without preamble when she answered.

"That depends on whether we'd been introduced. Kel?"

"Yep. Your friendly neighborhood pervert."

"Funny - that's exactly how you come up on my caller ID. Actually, I'd love one. A pizza, that is. I just got in and I'm starved."

"Terrific. Meet you at Fortunato's? Twenty minutes?"

"Twenty minutes."

Fortunato's was Paige's discovery, a tiny restaurant in Chatsworth. It served American-style pizza out of deference to the natives, but Carman Fortunato had brought a number of traditional recipes from his home town of Naples that bore little resemblance to the thin-crust American pies dripping with tomato sauce and crowded with ingredients no self-respecting *paisan* would ever allow in the door of a *pizzaria*. These Neapolitan pies were his specialties, and they were developing a fiercely loyal following. Paige was one of that growing number, and, through her, Kelden had become one as well.

They met at the door, where, despite the weather, they were surprised by a line for Fortunato's six tables. They hesitated, uncertain whether to wait, when Carman himself bustled up, greeted them as only an ecstatic Italian can, kissed Paige soundly on both cheeks, declared his

recent surge in business to be all her doing, and escorted them to a small seventh table in an intimate front corner, reserved at all times, he said, "for-a my especial-a friends."

"What was that all about?" asked Kelden, as Carman whirled away in a cloud of oregano to fix them his "best-a pizza ever."

Paige was hiding her face with one of her hands. "I really wish he hadn't done that," she murmured.

"I don't understand. What just happened?"

"Oh, I did the art work on an ad for the restaurant. His business has tripled, and he's looking to buy a bigger building. I'm sure the ad must've helped, but it was more likely the copy than the graphics. I mean, sure, I did a great job capturing a Neapolitan countryside, but you don't go to a new place just because of *that*. Actually," she leaned forward conspiratorially, "I think it's because I was the only obvious Italian on the team. When he found out I was single with no family in the area, he appointed himself my surrogate father."

Kelden grinned. "It sounds charming. And it got us a quick table."

"At the expense of everyone else in line."

"Come on, they'll get over it. Anyway, you didn't demand special treatment, did you? And it's his restaurant, right? So, if he wants to do something nice for someone, why not? It's his business."

Paige laughed. "All right. I'll try to remember that when the people at the end of the line glare at us. But if he comes over and tries to serenade us, I'm leaving!"

That dreaded fate never occurred, and the waiting customers were all seated within fifteen minutes, so Paige relaxed and allowed herself to enjoy the evening. Carman had removed a large fish tank and a vintage cigarette machine to fit in this extra table, leaving a planter to separate this corner from the rest of the room. The result was a cozy, almost private alcove, well away from the kitchen, where they were shielded from all but the most curious of eyes and the ambient conversations were muffled.

Their food arrived with a flourish. A large pie in the best tradition of the Campania region, it featured a thick crust topped with olive oil and great chunks of tomato, crowned liberally with clams, mussels, hard-cooked eggs, and artichoke hearts between layers of fontina, pecorino, mozzarella and parmesan cheeses, redolent with a half-dozen carefully blended spices. Kelden and Paige were suitably impressed, if a little leery of the creation, but their first bite brought a shower of praise down upon Carman Fortunato's proud shoulders. He promptly christened his new masterpiece "Pizza Santori" and hurried off to add it to his menu.

In between mouthfuls of Pizza Santori, their talk turned to the orchestra's upcoming Christmas "pops" concert. Kelden had offered Julian an arrangement of several carols in a three-movement suite that combined elements of the Baroque and Romantic periods with the dreamy harmonies and near-improvisational sounds of the New Impressionists. The orchestra had sight-read it at the last rehearsal and promptly voted to add it to the program. Paige praised it highly, and Kelden admitted that he'd done the arrangement nearly a year ago as a project to keep him sane during his breakup with Beth.

They were looking forward to the Italian ices Carman had promised for dessert when Paige finally asked how Tony was. Kelden hesitated at first, thinking of her warning to be careful and fearing she would disapprove of their conversations. But he wanted her opinions on the same issues – and, perhaps, to get in a few jabs himself against religion and maybe shake Paige's maddening self-assurance a bit. So he summed up Tony's arguments in succinct detail.

When he finished, Paige nodded thoughtfully. "Well, he certainly is consistent. We talked about pretty much the same things after he first came down here, and I don't think he's changed his mind since then. Too bad – I'd hoped I could at least convince him that not all Christians are like the ones he's run into."

"Well, he does seem to respect and admire you. He even suggested you paint my portrait, remember?"

"That's right, he did. Well, maybe my lectures haven't been entirely wasted. What's wrong?"

"What? Oh, nothing." Kelden had suddenly recalled Tony walking in on him while he was naked, his first full day in the Penthouse. It had seemed relatively unimportant, if a bit embarrassing, at the time; now, in view of Tony's sexuality and his own twinges of desire for him, he wondered if that moment was more significant – for both of them – than he'd realized. He wondered, too, if he really could have sat for Paige, and what he would have done had she walked in on him like that – or if he'd walked in on her. These thoughts flashed through his mind in less than thirty seconds, leaving him more than a little flustered. "I was just thinking of – something else. It's not important." Before Paige could challenge this evasion, Carman returned with the ices and cleared away the last scraps of the pizza. When he'd gone, Kelden asked, "What were you saying?"

Paige hesitated, then shrugged and said, "Well, his views on sexuality haven't changed, as far as I can tell. Which doesn't surprise me, because what he's saying actually makes a lot of sense."

"What?"

"I mean it. Think about it. Humans need love. That's a basic truth. They also need physical affection. American scientists proved that with monkeys, Nazi scientists proved that with human babies, and our psych wards and state homes are filled with more proof than a compassionate person can bear. And most psychiatrists and psychologists will tell you we need this just as much from our own sex as the opposite one, especially while growing up.

"Now, it takes trust to express affection on any level, especially because of the chance of rejection. Even a simple 'I think you're okay' can be hard, and it gets harder the more intimate you get – 'I like you', 'I love you', a touch, a hug, a kiss, all the way to intercourse. That's the most intimate expression of affection, and the most precious. It's the greatest gift one person can give to another."

"I can see that," Kelden admitted slowly. "I never thought of it like that, though."

"Most people don't, including Tony, until I pointed it out to him. He agrees that because of the preciousness of that gift, it should be given sparingly. His definition of monogamy, however, is somewhat looser than mine. Still, we also agree on the next logical step: If you feel deep affection for a person of your own sex, you should be able to give that person that gift."

"Wait a minute! Are you saying homosexuality is okay?"

"I'm saying it makes logical sense. And I'm also saying bisexuality makes the most sense of all, since you can share that gift equally with either sex."

"What? Now, wait a minute." Kelden masked his confusion with a light tone. "Is this the same Paige Santori who gave up lesbianism?"

"Wait, yourself. I merely said bisexuality is logical. In fact, I can take it even farther. I've done so with Tony, though he won't admit that those same equations can logically support incest."

"But if you admit what he says is right, then -"

"I admit those equations will give those results. But I've left out a factor that changes the answers dramatically."

Kelden sighed and shook his head with a wry smile. "I should've seen it coming. God, right?"

"Right."

"It always comes back to God, doesn't it?"

"As a matter of fact, yes. Because if there's no God, or He's not as depicted in the Bible, then the standard, accepted views of sex and morality and justice and ethics and - well, life itself - are no longer valid."

At that moment, Carman brought the check, which he'd already marked "Paid". This Paige vehemently protested, but Carman would not be swayed, and, in the end, they were forced to accept it. But she tipped him outrageously, and they hurried out before he could spot it and feign insult.

"What now?" Paige asked as they walked out to the parking lot.

"Well, there's no way you're letting that last statement just hang!"

Paige laughed. "But it's too cold to stand and talk out here!"

"My place?"

Paige hesitated, then shook her head. "My place. It'll be easier to throw you out."

Kelden laughed and agreed. They pulled away at the same time, but he was waiting at her door when she topped the stairs.

"One of these days," she predicted with a grin, "I'll have to come bail you out of jail."

"Most likely," he agreed. "I just hope it's only for speeding."

"Me, too. Coffee?"

"Please. Anything I can do?"

"Just keep me company while I make it. And tell me what you think."

"Of what?" Kelden seated himself at the kitchen table with some hesitation. Despite what he'd said outside Fortunato's, he was suddenly uncertain he wanted to continue the conversation.

"Of what? Of how nothing in our society - or any other society - would be valid without God!"

"Well - that's a little extreme, don't you think?"

"Is it? You tell me - what are our laws based on?"

"I know what you're gonna say - the whole Judeo-Christian ethic. But there are other philosophies in the world. What about Plato, or Confucius, just to name a couple?"

"Agreed. But even those are based on something more universal. Okay. For example: The law - any law - says you're not supposed to kill someone. Why?"

"Well, because they have just as much right to life as you."

"On what grounds? Say the murderer is a brilliant heart surgeon and the victim is a homeless crackhead."

"Well, ah, the crackhead has the same rights as the surgeon because - the Constitution says so?"

"The law gives that right because the law gives that right? Circular logic. No good. Anyway, what about your Platonic and Confucian systems? No U.S. Constitution there. Try again. Why should an abusive pimp be given the same rights as a great humanitarian? Why should a brain-damaged quadriplegic be given the same protections – or more – as an Olympic athlete?

"Because they're all equally human."

"But they're not all equal. And what intrinsic value do humans have over, say, aardvarks?"

"They don't look as weird!"

"Wrong! I've known humans who've made aardvarks look absolutely breathtaking! Guess again."

"I don't know – their ability to reason?"

"Good. But dolphins have that, too. Do you want your sister marrying one?"

"Oh, come on! Don't be ridiculous!"

"I'm not. Reasoning ability isn't enough, or the ability to use tools, or even the possession of an opposable thumb. So why do humans have greater value over other species? And don't say, 'just because they're human'. That's circular reasoning again."

"Then maybe dolphins should have rights, too!"

"They should. But that's not the question. You can't reason as well as Stephen Hawking could, and a person with Down Syndrome can't reason as well as you. Should Stephen Hawking have had more rights than you, and you more than the Down Syndrome victim?"

"Of course not."

"Then it can't be reasoning ability. And it's not social worth. It's not even the ability to survive. In some ways, the Down Syndrome victim – and Stephen Hawking, for that matter – have more rights and protections than you simply because their handicaps make them less fit for survival. So what are human rights and morals and laws based on?" She set his coffee in front of him and joined him at the table.

"I give up. What are they based on? As if I didn't know."

"On the fact that we're human."

"What? Damn it - you wouldn't let *me* use circular reasoning!"

Paige laughed. "Sorry. Couldn't resist that. But it's true - you just couldn't come up with a reason for humanity being its own excuse without circular logic. I can."

"Wait a minute! Yes, I can! Because we have the power to enforce those rights!"

"Might makes right? Sorry, that argument went out with the Dark Ages. Literally."

"All right. You have the advantage. The reason humanity has these rights is"

"Because our Creator gave us those rights."

"Aha! Gotcha! You can't prove a theory with an unprovable hypothesis!"

"Is it unprovable?"

"Of course! Can you point to God?"

"Well, no," admitted Paige. "No one can prove the existence of God the way you can prove there's a coffee cup on the table in front of you. Although there are philosophers and religious leaders and mathematicians who would deny the existence of even that coffee cup, or the table. Anyway, I'm not sure a God who could be proven in such ways would *be* a God. No, the proofs we have to use are different. The first is kind of by inference - the fact that we have morals and ethics at all suggests a source outside our world, because what good is an ethical system based solely on human thought? What makes America's system better or worse than Kuwait's? Or Plato's better or worse than Aristotle's? No matter whose system you choose, the very suggestion that it's 'better' or 'preferable' in any way implies an ultimate standard against which all such systems are judged, and that standard, by definition, must be outside this world."

Kelden thought a moment, then shook his head. "I don't know - that's awfully slippery. And anyway, just because there appears to be some ultimate standard doesn't mean there's some Judeo-Christian God out there."

"No, you're right. For that, I like to go to a different proof, the closest you'll get to a 'touch-the-coffee-cup'

kind."

"What - your gift of special knowledge?"

"Well, no, although now you mention it, that and healings and miracles and such do suggest that something, at least, lies beyond our limited senses. 'There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy.'"

"Kelden - the name's Kelden."

"Dang. So it is. No, I was thinking of Jesus Christ."

"How so?"

"Jesus Christ is the only man or woman in recent, verifiable history to claim to be God, demand all the respect and worship due God, and then back it up by returning from a horrible death without any external assistance."

"He claimed to be God?"

"He did. He wasn't just a wise teacher - no wise teacher would ever have made the claims He made. They'd either expose him as a bald-faced liar or lock him up as a madman."

"What if he was one of those?"

"Well, no one ever tried to claim He was insane, except maybe once when His family tried to cart Him away out of embarrassment. But the charge was never seriously leveled against Him by anyone with authority. And they knew what madness was, so they would've recognized it."

"Didn't they think madness was really demon possession, or something?"

"That was one explanation for it, yes. But that still shows they knew when something was wrong, even if they didn't have a definitive explanation. And if you include that, then He was accused once of being possessed. But that accusation was made in desperation and it never stuck. And as for Him being a liar - well, He was with His followers day and night for three years. They would've caught any inconsistencies in His claims and teachings, and even if He had been too sly to be caught outright, they would've at least suspected something. They weren't all ignorant fishermen; some of them were well educated. Yet, every one of them was willing to die equally horrible deaths for

His sake. You just don't do that for someone you suspect of lying."

"What if he was just honestly mistaken?"

"Yes, that seems like a possibility. But – well, let's say you get on a train in Chicago, heading to Bloomington, and you fall asleep. When you wake up, the train is in a station. You dash off, thinking you're in Bloomington, but you're really in Fell Park. You're honestly mistaken about your location, but that won't last long. You'd quickly find evidence to correct your mistake. Now if, in the face of that evidence, you continue to insist you're in Bloomington, we come back to the possibility of madness or delusion. With Jesus, no one brought good, hard evidence to contradict His claims of deity. If they had, and He still insisted He was God, then we're back to insanity. And that didn't happen."

"What if it did, and they just didn't write it down? Or they edited it out later?"

"Yep, that's a common argument. The problem is, the earliest manuscripts can be shown to have been written within the lifetimes and memories of those who would've been alive at the time, so the readers would have known if something significant had been left out. And the manuscripts were widely circulated, so they had plenty of opportunity to make 'corrections'."

Kelden pondered a while. "All right," he finally said slowly. "You base your argument on two things: First, he logically had to be who he claimed he was, and he backed those claims by coming back from the dead unaided. For the moment, let's agree that no one's been recorded as having successfully refuted his claims. But what if he didn't really come back from the dead? What if he didn't really die – they just thought he did?"

Paige shook her head. "Another common argument, and it's no good. First of all, He went into the trial under severe emotional distress, as shown in the Garden of Gethsemane. Then, during the trial, the Roman soldiers were commanded to flog Him. The standard device used at the time was the *flagrum*, a multi-lashed leather whip with bits of bone and metal at the ends, and there's no reason to

believe He was treated any better than any other prisoner. In fact, the soldiers would have been harder on Him, because He was accused of styling Himself as a king, greater than Caesar.

"Now, this *flagrum* would've ripped chunks of flesh and muscle and even veins from His back. These wounds would likely not have been treated while He was further beaten by the soldiers and the crown of thorns jammed down on His head. The soldiers draped a robe on Him as part of their mockery, and the blood from His back would have stuck to the fabric, violently reopening the wounds later when it was torn off.

"After a night in which He was given no medical treatment and, likely, no food or water, He was forced to drag His own heavy wooden cross through the steeply sloping streets of Jerusalem in front of an abusive mob. He'd been a carpenter all his life and had lived off the land for the last three years, so He had to have been tough, yet He was unable to drag that cross the full distance, which suggests how weak He was by this time.

"Then came the actual execution. Historical records show that Romans crucified their victims by driving large spikes between the wrist bones and through the feet, then hoisting them up. Death came slowly, and with great pain. When the victim could no longer bear the agony of the weight on the spikes in his wrists, his only relief was to put all his weight on the spike through his feet. Meanwhile, his chest and lungs were drawn upwards and compressed, leading to gradual suffocation. And this while enduring unbearable thirst and the psychological torture of a naked, public execution.

"Christ's death was faster than most, probably because of what he'd already been through. Pilate ordered a soldier to stab Him in the side with a spear to see if He truly was dead. That drew a combination of blood and watery fluids common in crucified persons who had died of a ruptured heart. The soldiers broke the legs of the other criminals to hasten their deaths, but they didn't have to with Jesus. They had probably seen scores of crucifixions

before and knew what to look for. When they took Him down, He was dead, and they knew it.

"After He was removed from the cross, His friends prepared His body. Jewish burial rituals were well documented. Normally, the body was carefully washed and anointed, but Jesus died not only close to a Sabbath when Jews were forbidden to work, but on the eve of the most holy Sabbath in the Jewish calendar, Passover. They did have time, at least, to wind the body in strips of linen about a foot wide, held together by a gummy mixture of spices weighing about a hundred pounds. Then they laid him in a tomb carved out of solid rock.

"Now, let's assume that, after the flogging, the untended wounds, the crucifixion, and the ruptured heart, Jesus somehow managed to survive. He would be barely alive and not just unconscious, since the experienced Roman soldiers thought Him dead. He was stuck in a cold, damp cave for over thirty-six hours under a hundred pounds of stifling cloth and spices with no medical attention whatsoever. Yet, at the end of that time, if our assumptions are correct, He not only revived, but revived sufficiently to take the time to unwind Himself, carefully rewind the cloth and spices, push aside by Himself a stone that had taken several men in perfect health to put in place, summon sufficient authority to panic half a dozen hardened, armed Roman soldiers who faced the death penalty if they abandoned their post, walk unaided back into Jerusalem without being seen, and appear to a group of completely demoralized men with such strength and vigor that they were convinced He'd actually risen from the dead! Now, which is easier to believe - that version, or the accepted one? And before you suggest that He really did die, but His body was stolen to fake a resurrection - well, not only did the Jewish Sanhedrin fail to push that very claim - and they had a lot more at stake than you do - but the psychology of those who would've been involved is all wrong. They went from beaten men, cowering in the dark, afraid to open the door to a woman they knew to be one of their own, to men willing to endure ridicule, beatings, and even their own

potential death, in less than a week. People don't do that for something they know is a lie!"

"All right." Kelden drained his coffee cup and sat back. "You've got some pretty strong arguments there. Suppose I accept them for the moment. What's your point?"

"Um - hang on." Paige looked a little sheepish. "I forgot where I was going with this. Okay. If God exists, and He is as depicted in the Bible, on the authority of the risen Jesus Christ, then Tony's arguments fall completely apart, because God has declared homosexuality and bisexuality to be against His will. Going against God's will is the basic definition of sin, and Jesus said the only way to be forgiven of sin is to accept Him and follow Him."

"And that's what you want me to do."

"That's what *God* wants, Kel. What other choice do you have?"

"I can choose to say 'no'."

Paige gazed steadily at him, then said quietly, "You can. But can I ask why?"

"I don't know. I'm just not convinced, I guess. But you're welcome to try again. Take all night if you want; I've got nothing to get up for tomorrow."

Paige sighed, stood, and took his cup with a wry smile. "It's a tempting challenge, and I would take you up on it, but I do have something, and rather early at that."

"Here. Let me help you." He came up behind her at the sink.

"That's all right. I -" She turned and collided with him. He grabbed her to steady both of them, then held on to stare into her eyes. They stood this way for a long instant, then he bent forward. She turned her head. "No, Kel," she whispered. "Please."

"Why? Because I'm not a Christian?"

"Partly, yes." She turned back and met his gaze again. "But mostly because I'm not ready for it. And neither are you."

They stared at one another, and then Kelden released her. "I guess I should be going, then."

Paige felt the sudden chill. "Kel," she said carefully, "I

want you to understand, I like you, and -"

"Please, don't." He smiled tightly. "It just makes it worse. I know, I've been on both ends." He pulled his coat on, then stopped. "Look. I'm sorry. Maybe you're right. Maybe we're not ready yet. But I don't know how much more ready - never mind. It's late. Good night."

"Kel!" She caught up with him at the door. "You're not - I mean - are you all right?"

His smile was twisted. "You mean, am I gonna get drunk and screw some pick-up in a bar? No. You mean, do I feel like a complete ass who can't seem to get anything right? Oh, yeah. But I guess I should be used to that by now. Really, go get some sleep, and don't worry about me. I'll brood about this and hate myself and you and the rest of the world for a couple of days, and by Monday rehearsal, we'll all be back to normal. Good night."

He strode away and down the stairs without looking back. Paige stood until she heard the downstairs door click shut. Then she whispered, "Damn it, Kel, why do I let you do this to me?" Rubbing her stinging eyes, she stepped back into her apartment and slowly closed the door.



After a moment, he murmured, "Dammit, Tony, I got no one, an' it's all my fault." His voice caught, and

suddenly he was sobbing.

Tony pulled him close and held him tight. "No, man," he whispered. "You got me. You got me."

*Kelden Scott
Antonio Garza*

Chapter 6

Kelden stood in the doorway and stared at the bed. His heart thundered and stumbled. The figure under the sheets stirred, turned toward him, and smiled.

"Hi, Kel." She spoke in a hoarse whisper.

"Hello, Laurie." He stepped into the hospital room. "You're looking great."

"You're a lousy liar."

She was right. The attack had left her severely bruised; the left side of her face was still slightly dark and puffy. Tubes no longer fed her, but bandages on her arms were reminders that this freedom had been but newly won. A large bouquet of Mylar balloons, and over-sized stuffed bear, and waves of flowers gave a desperately cheerful tone to the room and made her appear that much tinier and more vulnerable. Kelden could hardly stand to look at her. He forced himself to smile.

"Actually," he said, "you do look pretty good, all things considered. "Where can I put these?" He held out a dozen yellow roses in a cut glass vase.

"Let me see them." She still whispered, and Kelden suddenly realized she had no choice. She raised the head of the bed, and he held the flowers as she cupped her hands around them and buried her face in them.

"They're lovely. Thank you." She lay back, looking

tired. Her hands and wrists seemed more fragile than ever.

"You're welcome. How about if I put them over here?" He hurried to a table near the window, grateful that he could look away for a moment. As he shifted a couple of poinsettias, he thought, *My God, what have I done to her?*

"There," he said at last, when he could stall no longer. "Looks great." He turned back and took a chair by the bed, concentrating on her eyes. "So. How are you feeling?"

"Like you said, pretty good, all things considered. I've missed you."

"Oh. Yeah." He had to look away. "I'm sorry I didn't come by sooner. I've been pretty busy." A horribly lame excuse, it was no worse than the hundred others he'd considered.

"Yeah. I guess it got pretty hectic around there for a while." Her eyes, when he glanced at them again, held the hurt she didn't express. He realized, too late, that he hadn't said a word about missing her in return. Before he could try to correct that, she continued. "So how's it going now?"

"Um - much better. It's calmed down considerably."

"I understand you were promoted. Congratulations."

"What? Oh, thank you. Ah - we miss you around there." *Damn! We? Nice move, brother!*

"Thanks." She smiled, but it was the smile she used to give him years ago. He felt as though two other people had spent the past few months growing close. He saw another friend slipping away, and it goaded him into speaking.

"Listen." He leaned forward and took her hand. It was icy and unresponsive. "I didn't come sooner because I couldn't."

She nodded, no longer smiling. "You were busy."

"No. I just couldn't face you."

She squeezed her eyes shut and turned her head.

"At that party -"

"No." She barely breathed it, but it stopped him.

After a moment, he tried again. "I saw you in the hallway -"

"No!" she pulled her hand away.

"Laurie, I didn't want to hurt you -"

"No! Oh, God, no!" She began to tremble.

"No! Wait! You don't -! Laurie!"

She pawed at the sheets, sobbing hoarsely, then found and jabbed at the call switch.

He stood. "Laurie! Please! I didn't do anything! Not like that!" He tried to take her arm. She jerked away. From her lips came a sound that would have been a scream had she been capable of it.

"Laurie!"

"I'll have to ask you to leave, sir." The nurse startled him.

"But -!"

"Now, please!" For such a petite woman, she carried an incredible amount of authority. He backed away, then turned and managed not to run to the door.

He reached the elevators before he could no longer hear the thrashing and squeaking of the bed. The doors opened and disgorged a smiling family bearing balloons and stuffed animals. He pushed into the car and stabbed the button for the main floor. There was a coffee shop just off the lobby. He had to stop there. If he didn't, he would go straight to a bar.

His agitation lessened after the third or fourth scalding sip. It was worse than he'd feared. She must have remembered him trying to force himself on her. But she thought he'd been part of the main attack. She might even think he'd been the one trying to kill her.

He stared at the wall. Should he go back and try to work it out? Turn himself in to Fairchilde and Petrusko and tell them what really happened before Laurie told them what she thought she remembered? Just run? Leave Fell Park and start a new life somewhere else? Again?

Damn you, Paige! Why'd you tell me to make peace with her and David? Now they hate me more than ever! And you tell me to watch out for Tony? Damn it, he's the only one who really gives a shit! Just what the hell are you trying to do, force me into some mold set by your damned religion? Well, if this is the way your God does things, screw him!

Kelden walked out into the lobby, then hesitated. What about Laurie? The open elevator doors promised an answer.

He slipped in just as they shut and returned to the fourth floor.

"Ma'am?" He stood diffidently at the nurse's station in spite of his determination.

"Yes?" The nurse frowned slightly. She wasn't exactly antagonistic, but neither was she warm.

"Laurie Pachis – room 419 – how is she?"

"She's resting. She can't be disturbed. I assume you said something to remind her of what happened? Well, I'd suggest you not visit again until she asks you to, and then be careful what you say."

"But she'll be all right?"

"She'll be fine."

The nurse went back to her charts. Kelden looked up and spotted a cut-glass vase with a dozen yellow roses on a counter against the far wall. He left without bothering to ask which room they'd come from.

The following night was the final rehearsal before the Christmas concert. Kelden steadfastly refused to acknowledge Paige or Kathy during rehearsal and left immediately afterward, pretending he didn't see Paige approaching. He had no desire to speak to her.

On Tuesday evening, he stopped to check the posted results of his Spanish final. Despite his fears, his was the highest score in the class. He hunted up Tony with the good news. Tony had some of his own – he had comfortably passed his accounting exam. They went out to celebrate with tacos, tortillas, and Cokes.

On Wednesday, Tony invited Kelden to a meeting of CIGLA, the Central Illinois Gay and Lesbian Alliance. Kelden was amazed at how many of the members he recognized. He was also amazed at the intensity of anger in the room.

When Tony came over for dinner Thursday, Kelden peppered him with questions about the meeting. Tony admitted he didn't always agree with the opinions expressed there.

"Do not misunderstand, *mi amigo*," he frowned. "There are many of the ways we are treated that must be changed. But most are a matter of attitude. We would not need the

laws if people would accept us. And that is something you cannot force on someone with a law."

"But can't laws keep people from acting on their attitudes?" argued Kelden.

"Oh, *si*, to a certain extent. A law can keep you from trashing my keyboards, but it cannot make you like my music. A law can insist that Cervenka Construction be given the same opportunity to bid on a city job that the other contractors have, and it can forbid them to reject Cervenka because the owner and *primo* architect are gay, but it cannot force the city workers to smile and say to us '*buenos días*'."

"Especially if they can't speak Spanish."

"Ha! *¡Sí!* But that is what some of the CIGLA members want. I tell them they ask too much, but they do not listen."

"Maybe they're just tired of discrimination."

"*Quizás*. There are times I am tired of being treated *como un perro* because I am Mexican, and I want to force them to treat me right. But I have seen in my own neighborhood what happens when you try to do that. The whites, they have their gangs, and the Hispanics, they have their gangs, and *mi hermanita*, she was in the hospital when she was six years old with a bullet in the hip because of them. I do not want to see the gay gangs against the straight gangs."

"Neither do I. I'd hate like hell to have to kill you."

"And I would hate to kill you, too."

"*Gracias*. But if it's not because they're tired of harassment, what is it?"

"I think," Tony reflected, "it is power. They do not wish just to be allowed to live out their lives in peace, they want control. They use their orientation *como un cuchillo*, to stab and cut through anyone who does not agree with them. It is not because they are gay or lesbian or bi or transgendered or whatever that they seek these things; if they were straight, they would use some other difference – color, nationality, social position, or – *si* – even religion. To them, being gay is not a way to show *el amor*, it is a way to gain control. And because people, they do not want to be

controlled, they fight back, *y todo se esta empeorando.*" Tony shook his head. "*No lo sé. Tal vez me equivoque.* But I wish everyone would just live their lives quietly, without being so - so *militante.*"

"I don't know if this is the same thing," Kelden mused, "but I saw some celebrity once on a talk show. I don't remember his name. But he was a burly man with grizzled hair and beard and a gravelly voice - could've been a truck driver or factory worker. But he was dressed in some patterned, silk caftan thing, and the lilt in his voice and his fluttering hands and his breathy gossip columnist approach just about gagged me. I mean, that kind of thing bugs the hell out of me in a woman, but I just couldn't treat him seriously."

Tony nodded. "*Si. Yo sé de qué estás hablando.* He is an actor and a playwright. I think, *quizás*, he has forgotten to stop acting. I do not like it either, because it is so - so - *extremo.* Do you remember the old TV show, *Barney Miller*? The black cop, Harris, he tells another black man, 'contributions to stereotype are not tax deductible'. The *hombre* you saw is a living, breathing stereotype. *No lo sé.* Perhaps he is making a point, or perhaps this is how he truly is and he is just living an honest life. *Yo espero.* But I do not think he is helping us to be accepted. Someday, *quizás*, when people do not care any more if a person is gay or not, then men can act like the Hollywood starlets and women can act like the dock workers and no one will notice."

Kelden rubbed his beard. "I wonder. If it ever gets to that point, will they even have to act so extreme?"

Friday's concert started an hour earlier than the others in respect for the many children in the audience. It was heavily attended. The orchestra played Tchaikovsky's *Nutcracker* Suite, of course, along with several short seasonal works by both classical and popular composers, including the "Troika" from Prokofiev's *Lieutenant Kijé*, Leroy Anderson's "Sleigh Ride", the "Hallelujah Chorus" from Handel's *Messiah*, and even Danny Elfman's "Ice Dance" from Tim Burton's film, *Edward Scissorhands*. Kelden's suite of carols was a hit, and the evening was rounded off with

an audience sing-along and capped with the arrival of Santa himself, who took a turn conducting "Jingle Bells". The concert left the hall bathed in such a warm glow, Kelden even forgot to avoid Paige until it was too late.

"Congratulations, Kel." She smiled at him as they stood in the midst of the post-concert well-wishers. "Your piece sounded great."

"Thanks." Kelden smiled back, figuring he may as well at least be civil. "Although I'm sure the orchestra had a little something to do with that. That's got me thinking, though - maybe I should try writing something original some day. A symphony, maybe, based on my life - kind of like Strauss's *Ein Heldenleben*. We could call it *The Kelden Symphony*."

"That's really not a bad idea," laughed Paige. "Julian would welcome some original material. He was really disappointed when Ben's *Concertino* fell through."

"Ah! I should probably let them both know Tony's back, so we can do it after all. If we can find another guitarist as good as Mark."

"Julian will fly him back at his own expense if it means an original work on the program. So, how is Tony? I haven't seen him since he stopped by after Thanksgiving."

"Doing well. He helped me ace my Spanish final, and I helped him pass his accounting exam."

"Great."

The conversation died. Kelden glanced around, but everyone else was occupied. He wondered if Paige felt as uncomfortable as he did. He stole a quick look at her. She, too, was looking around. "Well," he said, "can I walk you to your van?"

"Um - thanks, but I walked. It was more like October out there today."

"It's awfully dark to walk halfway across town alone."

"I'm a street person from way back, remember?"

"Even street people get killed. Let me give you a ride,"

"Honestly, that's not necessary."

"Come on." He was already wondering why he'd offered, but now that he had, he wouldn't back down. "I'm ready to go now, unless there's someone else you want to

talk to.”

“No, not really.”

“Fine. Let's go.”

She allowed him to lead her out. It had been, as Paige said, a beautiful day, but a cold front had moved in shortly after they'd arrived. All the snow and slush that had been melting earlier was now refreezing. Kelden made a show of carefully steering them across the new ice sheets, using this as an excuse to remain silent, although they both knew a little ice wouldn't bother him or the Spyder in the least.

“Kel?” After the first few minutes, Paige decided she didn't want to play that game.

“Mm?” Kelden swerved cautiously around a small ice patch, intent on preserving his illusions. Paige, however, had other plans.

“What's wrong? Are you still upset about last Friday?”

“Last Friday?” Kelden was honestly surprised. “No! You're more interested in your religion than any relationship we might have. That's fine. I can handle that. I made the mistake of showing my feelings; I won't do that again.”

“It's never a mistake to show your feelings!”

“It is if you don't want to get hurt.”

She watched as he smoothly and effortlessly whipped the Spyder around an ice-locked corner, then asked, “What happened, Kel?”

“What do you mean, 'what happened'?”

“I mean, what happened since Friday? You're so distant – you're not the Kel who left my place.”

Kelden shrugged. “I've done some more thinking. Oh, and I saw Laurie.”

“Ah.”

“Yes, 'ah'.”

“It didn't go well?”

“You might say that. I tried apologizing. Like you said. But I never got a chance. She jumped to conclusions and thinks I was part of the actual rape.”

“Oh. I truly am sorry. But if you'll remember, all I said was you'd have to apologize eventually, not right away. And that I didn't think she was ready for it.”

"Whatever. It turned her against me. But, hey, I'm used to that."

Paige was silent for nearly three blocks. Then she said, quietly, "This isn't like you, Kel."

"Really? What *is* like me? And what the hell do you or Kathy or anyone else truly know about me?" He pulled over in front of her apartment building. "Face it, Paige." He killed the engine. "You don't know one thing about me." She started to speak, but he cut her off. "Not one goddamned thing. How can you? I don't even know myself." He opened his door, jumped out, stalked around the front of the car to her door, and jerked it open. She sat for a long moment, then picked up her violin and climbed out.

"You're wrong, you know," she said quietly as she stood.

"What?"

"Even assuming you don't know yourself, and I admit I can't know every nuance about you. Still, I know you well enough to know that this – this coldness, this anger, isn't really you."

"And how do you know, damn it?" Kelden clenched his fists. "How can you stand there and tell me who or what I am? You didn't grow up with me, you haven't lived with me! You haven't seen how many people I've hurt! You do *not* know me, and don't give me those fairy stories about 'special knowledge', 'cause I'm not buying 'em!"

"They're not stories, Kel, it's –"

"Jeez, Paige! Give me a little credit!" He jabbed at his forehead.

"I've given you a lot of credit Kel. Maybe too much. But all right – *all right!*" She refused to be interrupted again. "I won't plead 'special knowledge' and embarrass your intellect. I don't have to. You've allowed me to see too much of you to believe what you're saying now. I've seen your compassion, and your sensitivity, and your warmth, and don't try to tell me it was all an act, because I know better, and so do you! It was real, Kelden Scott, and it was beautiful!"

"And what the hell did it get me? Nothing but pain!"

"And what did coldness ever get you?"

"Not this kind of pain!"

"No, because you weren't alive!"

"You call this living? Half the people in this town hate me -"

"They don't hate -"

"- I've put one woman in the hospital, I've destroyed what I thought was a decent friendship, I spend hours a day brooding and feeling guilty, I've wanted to die at least once already, and I'll probably try to do it one of these days - what kind of life has openness and compassion and warmth gotten me?"

"It's gotten you a real life, with real feelings! It's gotten you friends who love you and have stuck with you through all the - the crap you've dished out!"

"Bullshit! It's got me nothing but grief, and I'm done with it!"

"So what are you gonna do? Turn yourself to steel? You can do that, sure. But where do tenderness and caring and compassion come in? They don't! I know, Kel! I was there! A hardened heart has no room for caring - not even for itself!"

"It has no room for pain, either."

"Oh, you're so wrong. That's all it has room for. That, and anger and bitterness and hate. You'll still have pain, but it'll all come from the inside. Kel. . . ." Paige struggled with herself, moving and rubbing her neck in agitation, while he stared at her with stone eyes. Finally, she lay her violin case on the sidewalk and took a deep breath. "Look, I'd promised myself I wouldn't interfere, but I can't just stand back and watch someone I care about go through the same hell I did! You don't really want to close yourself off to love and joy and all the rest, no matter how much pain comes with it!"

"What's this?" Kelden's voice was thick with ice. "More 'special knowledge'?"

"No. Just the simple observation of someone who's been there and who's gotten to know you at least a little bit. You hold yourself away from a lot of people, but you

don't really want to turn your back on us completely."

"Watch me." He turned and was about to start back around the front of the car, but Paige grabbed his arm. He whirled, startled, and stared down into eyes that flashed and set his heart racing in spite of his anger.

"Don't do this to me!" Paige hissed. "Or yourself!"

"Do what?"

"Cut me off!"

"What the hell does it matter to you?" He felt betrayed by his own emotions, furious that he could still want her. He flung her hand off his arm, and she stumbled a little. "The only thing you care about," he shouted, "is your damned God! All I am to you is another potential convert, another -"

"That's not -!"

"- another scalp on your belt, like Kathy!"

"That's not fair, Kelden! And you know it's not true! I care about *you*, not just your soul!"

"Yeah?" He took a step closer. "Then prove it."

"Prove it? How much more proof do you need?"

"Sleep with me."

"What?"

"Sleep with me! I want you, I know you want me. Or are you too good, too holy, to admit to one human -?"

Paige's slap stopped him. After one frozen moment, he turned his head back to look at her. She stood with her fingers pressed against her mouth. His tiny smile was triumphant and mocking. He nodded twice, a barely discernible dip of his head, murmured, "I thought not," and turned away.

Paige watched him walk around the front of his car, then strode after him. "How dare you?" she cried. "How *dare* you? Turning this into some sexual -!" He slammed the door before she reached it. As the Spyder roared to life, she struck the window and shouted, "*Kelden!*" Then she had to jump back as the car leapt forward, rear wheels spinning. Not once did he look at her.

She stared after his taillights, shaking. He knew what she'd gone through, he knew the pain and humiliation that

had torn her as a child and left her sexually and emotionally scarred. And yet he could still try to manipulate her with emotional blackmail! For a moment she felt again the violation and shame that she'd felt at the age of six when her father came to her room in the night, or at the age of twelve when her fifteen-year-old cousin raped her. Snow had begun to fall again; thick, wet snow that mixed with her tears.

Oh, my Lord! She wept silently; then, unable to put words to the cries of her heart, she could only repeat, *oh Lord, oh Jesus*, over and over. A car swept by, horn blaring, and she slowly moved to the curb, retrieved her violin, and entered the building. Her pleas were answered as she climbed the stairs. Peace nearly overwhelmed her, reminding her that she was loved with a pure love by a Father Who would never violate her.

And then, as she closed her apartment door, she was struck with a double realization: First, that God hurt for her as much as she hurt for herself; and, second, that He hurt just as much for Kelden. She protested, unwilling to admit compassion for him, but an unheard Voice reminded her that she, herself, had just urged compassion on Kel. And when she could accept that, the Voice gently told her, "I love Kelden no less than I love you. His wounds are different than yours, but they've crippled him as yours have crippled you. I would heal him as I'm healing you. Can you forgive him; or, at least, allow Me to forgive him through you?"

Paige drifted into the darkened living room. Christmas lights in nearby windows and on balconies cast their gentle rainbows through her open curtains. She picked up Sarah Lynn and held the doll tightly to her. "Oh, Kelden," she whispered, "what have I done?" Once more, tears tumbled down her cheeks. They were no longer for herself.

The Christmas lights strung around the bar and stage at Bricker's added a brittle scintillation to the atmosphere. The band on stage wasn't bad, but it wasn't anything special, either. The dance floor was comfortably crowded,

but the crowd at the tables and the bar was thicker. It was a perfect place in which to be lost.

Michael Bachman stood in a darkened corner where he could catch occasional glimpses through the shifting bodies of one at the bar who was trying to lose himself. For some time, Michael had watched him slowly and steadily drinking with the deliberation of one who no longer cared. He had started toward him more than once, changing his mind every time. David would be coming by in another half-hour, but David would be as helpless as he. There was another person he could call, but he hesitated to interfere. Still – he made a rapid decision. After one last glance toward the bar, he pulled out his phone and stepped outside.

Tony arrived twenty minutes later. He wandered over to the bar and sat next to Kelden, but shook his head when Kenny came over to take his order. He waited patiently while Kelden stared straight ahead. They sat this way for a couple of minutes, then Kelden signaled Kenny for another refill.

"You gonna lecture me?" Kelden asked, still not looking at Tony.

"*Todo depende, hombre.* You gonna drive home like that?"

Kelden shrugged. Kenny set another drink in front of him, and he swallowed nearly half of it before he spoke again. "Y'know," he said, "I've had 'bout six of these sons of bitches since I got here. I don't think they're workin'."

"No, man." Tony shook his head. "Maybe you do not know it, but you are very drunk."

"I don't feel like it."

"Take my word for it, man. You have another one of those, and you will be out cold."

"Not a bad idea." Kelden started to catch Kenny's eye again, but Tony stopped him.

"*¡Ten piedad de mí, hombre!* I do not have the strength to carry you *todo por mí mismo!*"

"Who says I wanna leave?"

"I do."

"You gonna tell me what to do, now?" Kelden scowled

and turned to Tony, then grabbed at the bar to keep from falling. "Jeez!"

"*Si, hombre. Vámonos.* Anyway, you wanted to talk to me, and it is too noisy in here."

"Yeah." Kelden fumbled out the money for his last drink. Kenny materialized and made change, then, while Kelden drained his glass, leaned over the bar and murmured, "Hey, Gar - you driving?"

"*Si.*"

"Okay. 'Night."

"*Buenos noches, Kenny.*"

"See ya, Kenny, my man," added Kelden. Then he grabbed Tony's arm. "Here," he said, handing him the keys to the Spyder. "I think you better do this."

"*Gracias.* It would give me great pleasure to drive that car again."

"Maybe I'll just give it to you." Kelden navigated the crowd surprisingly well.

"Nah, man. I could not afford the insurance." He spotted Michael to one side, standing with David, watching. *Thanks for calling me, man,* Tony thought, nodding to him. Then he followed Kelden out, getting him to the parking lot and situated in the passenger's seat. Within moments, they were on their way. The heavy, wet snow caused them to skid once or twice, but they made it to Tony's apartment without incident.

"This is your place," Kelden observed as he crawled out and squinted at the building.

"It was closer," Tony shrugged.

The fresh air seemed to help; Kelden was still very drunk, but seemed much less likely to pass out. He was actually humming a little when they got into the apartment.

"Hey, where's - what's-'er-name?" he asked, abruptly.

"Carla?" Tony made a face. "She did not want someone who was all the time so busy. So tonight, she said '*adios*'."

"Smart girl."

"*Gracias.* I like you, too."

"No, I mean it." Kelden dropped his coat on the floor

and himself on the sofa. "Relationships're pure shit. You're better off alone, 'n' so's she. Take my word f'r it. Ya got anythin' to drink? Or, y'know -?" He pantomimed sucking on a joint.

"*Lo siento*, man. I got nothing here. You hungry?"

"Yeah."

"Are tuna sandwiches good enough?"

"Sounds revoltin'. Y' need help?" Kelden carefully got to his feet.

"*Gracias*. Your concert, how was it?"

"Hey, best ever! Too bad y' weren't there. Where the hell were you?"

"I was here, in my apartment, arguing with Carla."

"Oh, yeah. Tha's right. She dumped you."

"I do not find it a reason for celebration."

"Oh, but it is, man, it is!" Kelden forgot about helping with the food. "Yer a free agent now, jus' like me! Y' don't hafta make anybody happy but yerself. Y' don't hafta worry 'bout steppin' on anyone's toes or hurtin' anyone's feelin's, an' if y' do, who gives a shit? Not you, man. Yer free! Y' got no one tellin' ya what t' do, or say, or – or b'lieve. Lemme tell y' somethin, man." He draped a conspiratorial arm around Tony's shoulders. "Don't. Ever. Feel. Y' know what I'm sayin'? Be ice, man. Be steel." He frowned slightly, trying to remember where he got those words. He shook his head. His mind wouldn't work right. "Y' start feelin', man, firs' thing y' know, people get hurt. They get raped, or y' fight wi' them, and *you* get hurt. 'Cause y' know *you're* the one hurt 'em an' they prob'ly think yer shit, an' y' know what? They're right." He slapped Tony on the arm, then moved away, chuckling. Tony watched him carefully. "Oh, yeah, man. They're right. Nothin' but a little pile o' dog shit. Tha's all y' are." He placed his hands flat on the kitchen table and leaned heavily on them, head bowed. His shoulders began to shake.

"Kel," Tony said quietly, "I think you are being too hard on yourself. You got a lot of friends, man, they do not think _"

Kelden barked out a single laugh and wiped a hand

across his face, leaving his glasses askew. He dropped them on the table. "She's afraid o' me, man! She thinks I raped 'er!"

"But you did not -"

"*My God! Don't you understand?! I started to! An' then she screamed, an' everybody else came! Y' know why she's lyin' there? 'Cause I put 'er there!*"

"Kel, you did not mean to -"

"An' Paige - my God, y' shoulda heard what I said to *her*! I left 'er cryin' in th' street, man, in th' goddamn street, jus' like Kathy! Jeez, Kathy. There's another. An' Kayla! God knows what *she* thinks o' me! An' Claudia! Hey, y' ever had a woman *an'* her daughter? Don' bother. Too complicated. An' when y' slip up, they both hate ya. Two f' th' price o' one. Jus' like David an' what's-'is-name. Bachman. Mr. Attorney. Mr. Three-Piece-Suit." He started giggling, and stumbled. Tony leapt to keep him from falling. Kelden grabbed him, trying to remain upright. "Don' touch me!" he hissed. "I might hurt ya, an' then you'll hafta hate me, too."

"I will never hate you, man."

"Then it's jus' you 'n' me 'gainst th' rest o' th' goddamn world, kid!" Tony surrendered and lowered him gently to the floor. Kelden seemed not to notice. "Y' know, *he* hates me, too."

"Who?"

"He took 'er, an' won't let me have 'er."

"Who, man?"

"Damn you, God!" Kelden suddenly shouted, trying to struggle to his feet, while Tony fought to hold him down.

"Man, do not waste your breath," he gasped. "He does not care."

Kelden lost his balance and sent them both sprawling. They lay together, panting, then he giggled again. "'Our *nada*, who art in *nada*,'" he intoned, "'hallowed by thy *nada*.' Hemmingway," he added, then fell silent. After a moment he murmured, "Dammit, Tony, I got no one, an' it's all my fault." His voice caught, and suddenly he was sobbing.

Tony pulled him close and held him tight. "No, man," he whispered. "You got me. You got me."

Kelden clung to Tony and wept, and although the sorrow started with the alcohol, it soon came from much deeper. The pain of years forced itself to the surface, and his carefully constructed defenses were too numb, too lost in a fermented mist, to respond. Sometimes he sobbed sometimes he moaned; sometimes his pain was too deep for any sound at all. But through everything, he gripped Tony with the desperation of one who sees an endless void beneath his feet, sucking at him, waiting for him to slip. And Tony held him as one holds a child, stroking his hair, murmuring to him in English and Spanish the comforts of a mother, the assurances of a lover. Together they lay on the floor of Tony's kitchen, until the trembling in Kelden's body grew still, and he slept.