

RED

BY BRIAN D. MCCOY

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DEDICATION

To my mother, Cherie McCoy, for your faith and never ending support.
Thank you!

DISCLAIMER

This book is a work of fiction. Although the Tenderloin District is a real place in the city of San Francisco, all of the schools, events, and situations in this story are purely fictional. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

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One Last thing

CHAPTER 1

Bruno Vic Vizcarra looked down the steep road that was Eddy Street. He lived in the heart of San Francisco's Tenderloin District, a part of the city that was dangerous enough during the day, but deadly at night. His mother had gone to the store for some orange juice, or at least that's what she told him. But Bruno knew better. He was worried about his mother and had been watching for her return when he saw a shadowed movement under the streetlight. Two figures hide behind one of the neighbor's semi-circle steps. He recognized them immediately. It was Peter Hastings and Jed Bentley.

Bruno's legs tightened. Although he was only fourteen years old, he stood just shy of six feet. He never lifted weights like the jocks at San Francisco High, but he had the wide shoulders, and thick chest that they spent hours hoping to develop. His skin was an almond color that he acquired from his Navajo father. He had a strong nose, slightly raised cheekbones and thick dark hair that framed a glowing white smile. He took after his father--who had been a San Francisco cop--not only in size, but in principle and in morals as well. Bruno's mother should be returning any minute. It didn't take a homicide detective to figure out why Peter and Jed had come to Eddy Street.

Peter and Jed went to San Francisco High School where gangs like the Bloods, Crips, and West Side Mobb plagued the campus. Of course they weren't connected to any of the gangs, but they were still dangerous. They had a reputation of rolling anybody who had more than ten dollars in their pocket.

The rumor was that Peter had a gun, and Jed had a pair of brass knuckles. They robbed women; most of whom simply gave up their purses. But if they didn't, Jed loved to swing his brass knuckles.

Bruno stood up a little too quickly and the porch swing slammed against the wall. A muffled sound echoed within his little porch. Bruno shot into the house. He moved to the television set, unplugged the extension cord and wrapped it around his hand. He grabbed a cord that was connected to a lamp and did the same, stuffing each in his pants pockets. He wasn't going to let Peter and Jed send his mother to the hospital.

The eighth grader ran to the center of Eddy Street. His sneakers slapped against the pavement as he made his way toward Van Ness. His body felt electrified. He could hardly contain the energy that wanted to burst forth. He wanted to move in on Peter and Jed; attack them before they could get to his mother. But Bruno knew he had to wait. His father had taught him the Navajo ways of battle. He must wait for the perfect moment to strike.

Peter and Jed were hidden two houses away. They were crouched in the shadows behind the arched stairway leading up to Mr. Shen's house, but Bruno could see them clearly. As he reached the center of the street, he slowed to a walk, stopping parallel to Peter and Jed's hiding place. He bent down and started untying his shoes. This was another trick his father had taught him.

Bruno tied the two laces together to form one long lace. He wrapped the lace around his left hand, and sat down in the middle of the street knowing that his odd behavior would unnerve Peter and Jed, hoping it might cause them to give up their attack upon his mother. A car turned off Van Ness and onto Eddy Street. People were used to seeing odd behavior within the city of San Francisco. The car veered around Bruno and headed up the hill toward Nobb Hill and the Silver Spoon District.

The door to 774 opened and the new girl stepped out.

Evelyn Rose Thompson moved to Eddy Street yesterday. She hated it. Evelyn had been born in a grand home with winding staircases, marble floors, and incredible views. Her house was built upon San Francisco's headlands in the center of the Silver Spoon District. She had views that overlooked the Pacific Ocean on one side and San Francisco Bay on the other.

Evelyn looked down Eddy Street. Her new neighbor was sitting in the middle of the street. What on earth he was doing? A car turned up Eddy Street and veered around him. Evelyn rolled her eyes and thought, perfect, welcome to the insanity. She was about to go back inside when a small movement caught her eye.

A woman was stumbling up Eddy Street. She was singing loudly as she made her way up the sidewalk. Evelyn couldn't quite make out the tune, perhaps it was an old nursery song that her mother should have sang to her as a child. Without knowing why, Evelyn knew this woman was in danger. Perhaps it was the crazy boy in the center of the street.

Evelyn jogged toward the woman. She ran past sitting boy and reached her half way up the block. The woman stopped a little too quickly. She teetered on the verge of tipping over, and Evelyn knew instantly that the lady was drunk.

"Why, hello, new neighbor. You're the girl from across the street. I saw you and your mother move in yesterday. You're going to love it here on Eddy Street." She raised her arms. "Everyone is so friendly here."

Evelyn shrank back. Something about this woman made her feel uncomfortable. Perhaps it was the way she looked at Evelyn, or maybe the fact that Evelyn was quite sure the glass of orange juice was really some alcoholic drink. Evelyn suddenly wished she had stayed on her little porch.

The woman held the glass to her lips, taking a healthy gulp. She looked Evelyn up and down, "It's Evelyn Rose, right? Boy, oh boy, you're a busty thing. You should meet my son. He's about your age."

Evelyn was shocked. She had had enough of this drunken lady. Evelyn just wanted to be back in her real home, her home within the sanity of the Silver Spoon, the home where she truly belonged. How had this happened? How could she, Evelyn Rose Thompson, survive life in the Tenderloin District? The people on this street were low-lives, white trash, the crusty end of pizza that you toss into the garbage. Evelyn thought, "Jeez lady, the last thing I need is to meet some drunco's son." She looked for sitting boy. He was gone.

"Listen lady, I don't think it's safe out here. Let me get you back to your home." She was about to grab the woman by the arm when two dark figures rushed in.

Peter Hastings moved in from behind the lady. He wrapped his forearm around her neck and squeezed. Vivian Vizcarra dropped her glass. Her eyes went wide with fear. She tried to scream, but no air would escape Peter's vice-like grip. She gave up trying to scream, concentrating only on getting precious air into her lungs. That's when Jed Bentley moved in. He pushed Evelyn out of his way. She was nothing more than an obstacle between him and the money he needed to steal. Jed yanked the purse from Mrs. Vizcarra's trembling arms. Once Jed had the purse, Peter shoved Vivian to the ground. Jed Bentley tucked the purse under his arm and turned to run.

Evelyn yelled, "Wait." That's not yours." Even as the words left her mouth she thought, "Good Lord Evelyn, how stupid is that? Of course they know it's not theirs. They just stole it."

Jed and Peter were laughing in their glory. They ran up the street, falling right into Bruno's trap.

Bruno had moved into the shadows. He positioned himself under a leafy bush in the line of Peter and Jed's escape route. The house behind Bruno had an unusually large gap between it and the neighboring home. The backyard had a small fence that would be easily traversed. Peter led the way. He veered off Eddy Street heading for the opening between the two houses.

Bruno exploded from the bush like a crazed Indian warrior. He hit Peter first. Forming his hand into a tomahawking weapon Bruno swung the backside of it into Peter's Adam's apple. Peter dropped to his knees and clenched his throat. Jed's grip tightened about the brass knuckles. His fist moved in an arcing swing that would have crushed Bruno's jawbone, but Bruno was too fast. Bruno dipped his head to the side while driving his knee into Jed's gut.

Jed dropped to the cold, grassy lawn. Bruno swung his other knee into Peter's back, and Peter fell face first next to Jed. With the two high schoolers face down before him, Bruno unraveled his shoelaces, which by now he had fashioned into a crude lasso. He looped the lasso around Peter's head and then Jed's. Pulling it taut he brought their heads together with a smack. Bruno pulled the first extension cord out of his pocket and looped it around their hands securing them behind their backs. He used the other cord to tie their ankles together, and then pulled this cord up to their hands. He tied it off and finally plugged the two cords into one another, so that both boys were hog-tied with their bellies on the grass.

"I'm pretty sure you have heard of me. My name is Bruno Vic Vizcarra. I've heard of you, but I'm not impressed." He grabbed their feet and spun them around so that they were facing his mother.

"You see that lady? The one you just tried to rob? Well, that's my mom. She is off limits. You understand me?"

Bruno walked to his mother. He picked up her purse, then placed an arm around her. He looked at her broken glass, the real reason his mother had left earlier that evening. "I guess a little good can come out of almost anything."

Evelyn smiled.

Mrs. Vizcarra turned to Evelyn and placed a hand on her cheek. "Thank you young lady. That was nice, what you tried. But as you can see, my son is always here to protect me."

Bruno looked down and gave a sheepish smile. "I just wish you didn't drink so much mom. I thought you were just going to the store."

"Oh, I just needed a little nip. My mind got thinking about your father again."

Evelyn watched as Bruno's eyes moved to meet hers. They were dark and dangerous, like the night sky that clung so mysteriously around her new neighborhood.

Mrs. Vizcarra caught the look and said, "Well, Evelyn Rose, what do you think? My son's awful handsome isn't he?"

Evelyn never liked the formality of Evelyn Rose. Only her father called her Evelyn Rose. However, that was a privilege he no longer had. It was dark. Evelyn didn't know or care whether sitting boy was handsome. He lived on Eddy Street, so he was white trash.

Bruno towered over her. "You just moved in yesterday, right?"

Evelyn nodded.

"Thanks for trying to help my mom. I hope you like it here. It's really not so bad as they say." Then he turned back toward Peter and Jed. His voice turned cold again. "I want my extension cords back. You know where I live, 777 Eddy. Just leave them on the porch. Don't make me come looking for them."

CHAPTER 2

By the end of second period Evelyn had learned a wealth of information about Sir Francis Drake Middle School. First of all, last night's little robbery attempt was just a taste of what kids were like here in the Tenderloin District. There were three types of students at her new school, none of whom attended any school she had gone to in her past life.

The first group at Drake was the victims. They reminded Evelyn of her new neighbor, Mrs. Vizcarra. These kids clung to the sides of the hallways, their shoulders bumping into the combination locks as they made their way from class to class.

Next, you had the want-a-be tough guys. These kids reminded Evelyn of Peter and Jed from last night. She smiled as she pictured them hog-tied and lying face down in the grass. These want-to-be tough guys of Drake were quick to join a gang, and they acted tough, but they never dared to make a move without the approval of their leader. All the gangers hung out in the halls. Most of them never even went to class. They huddled, just looking for their next victim; searching for one of the meek and weak slugs to attack. The entire gang would swarm around their victim, screaming profanities and shoving the slug back and forth amongst their fellow gangers, while the poor student did their best to make their way to class.

The third type of student here at Drake was the truly tough kid. These were the gang leaders. Even the teachers seemed to be scared of these kids. Most teachers simply stayed in their rooms, not wanting to venture out into the halls. Evelyn found herself wishing for the sitting boy. But the mountainous Bruno Vic was nowhere to be seen.

Third period was U. S. History with Mr. White, a portly man who had come to America from Korea seven years ago. It was obvious by the way he spoke about America that he loved living in the United States. However, this was not the case when it came to teaching middle school. Mr. White was not one of the teachers who would venture into the hallways.

Evelyn sat at her desk. She had no recollection how she'd gotten here. The morning was a blur, like a dream where you walk past people and you look right through them. She tried to read, but found it difficult to concentrate. One minute she would be reading a paragraph about the hardships of young plantation owner, and the next she would find herself thinking about her father. In her mind's eye she stood before him. He was dressed in his thousand-dollar suit. She reached out to him, grabbing his fancy shirt; wrapping her fingers about the fine silken threads and shaking him. She began yelling at him as if he was a child. "How could you? How could you care so little about mom and me? See where we have to live now? I hope you're happy. I hope really happy, because as far as I'm concerned, you can go straight to He..."

"Evelyn Rose." Mr. White's words broke into Evelyn's thoughts.

She looked up. Evelyn didn't know how it had happened, but she was caught daydreaming. Somehow she hadn't even heard Mr. White's question. This never happened to her before. Evelyn had always thought it funny when a student was caught off guard. But now Evelyn herself had been caught, and harsh words came out before she realized. "It's Evelyn. Not Evelyn Rose. Just Evelyn and I'm sorry but I'm going to have to pass."

"Well, Evelyn Rose," Mr. White paused, to punctuate the "Rose," then continued in his broken English. "You got no pass in my class. Maybe you got pass in your preppy school up in Silver Spoon district. But no pass here. Here you study, or you fail. You understand? I want five hundred words essay by tomorrow."

The class burst into laughter, and a wave of embarrassment wash over Evelyn. There was a powerful presence behind her, a girl pushing out a forced howl of an obnoxious cackle.

Evelyn spun around in her chair. Evelyn meant to put a stop to the insufferable girl, but the minute her eyes met Naydas Rascondas's she froze. Naydas was dangerous, one of those kids that you did not want to mess with. She had rich black skin that looked as soft as melted chocolate. However this girl was not chocolate sweet. She was shorter than Evelyn, but she had to weigh close to two hundred pounds.

Still, Evelyn paid no heed. She was still fuming about her father and blurted out, "How in the world did you squeeze yourself into that tiny little desk? Do you need a shoe horn to pop yourself out of there at the end of class?"

Evelyn instantly regretted her comment. All the kids around her began to snicker. Naydas swelled with embarrassment, her stomach pushing against the desktop. Her eyes bulged out like ping pong balls; the black pupils quivering with anger.

Evelyn turned facing the front of the room. She tried to sink down in her chair, to make herself invisible. But, Naydas's bulging eyes burned at her back.

The bell for fourth period rang.

Fourth period was lunch. As the kids scrambled from their desks Evelyn stayed put. The last thing she wanted was to see Naydas out in the halls. Evelyn knew that would not end well. She was a fast writer and finished the 500-word essay in no time. After handing it to Mr. White she walked out of the classroom and into the hallway. It was empty. Well, not entirely empty. There were students milling around, but Naydas Rascondas was nowhere in sight. Evelyn figured Naydas was at the cafeteria stuffing her face. Evelyn was not hungry, so she decided to go directly to fifth period. She intended on getting there a little early, perhaps she would have better luck in Algebra class. She headed down the hall toward fifth period. The floor was repulsive. They would never leave the floors this filthy at Mother Mary's Parochial School where Evelyn had such fond memories. She turned the corner. Naydas blocked her path. A handful of kids were standing behind her, anxious to see the new girl get an official Tenderloin District welcome from The Daus.

Evelyn knew Naydas would wipe the floors with her, but she also knew that she had to show a strong face. Evelyn had seen what happened to the weak students. They became victims; slugs who were constantly harassed. Evelyn refused to become a slug. She had had enough of the Naydas and her intimidation. Evelyn moved in on Naydas. She leaned forward trying to push the oversized student out of her way. Evelyn only succeeded in pushing herself backward.

"Do you mind moving your overstuffed, panda-bear-body out of my way?"

Naydas moved with lightning speed. Her hand flew to Evelyn's face, slapping her hard. The stinging pain rattled Evelyn. She bit her lip to hold back the tears. Her voice cracked. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have said that." Evelyn walked around Naydas and headed down the hallway.

A boy called out to her. "You don't want to mess with The Daus."

Naydas chimed in, jeering Evelyn as she retreated, "That all you got? Don't you got no more sophisticated, Silver Spoon comments? Why don't you go back to your stupid little prissy school?"

The small crowd of students circled The Daus, cheering her easy victory.

Evelyn walked through two main doors leading to the center quad area where all the students ate lunch. That was the last place Evelyn wanted to be, so she made her way out the rear doors. Just outside these doors were stone steps leading down to an open field with a dilapidated football field, complete with a circular dirt track, and goal posts on either end.

Evelyn stopped just outside the doors. They clanged shut behind her. She sat on a concrete wall that acted as a cement railing. The railing had thick stone bricks that were attached to the school and then sloped down following the contour of the steps. Evelyn looked

down at the stone slab upon which she was sitting and was reminded that she was in the heart of gang country. The structure was covered in graffiti.

Evelyn took a deep breath. She was finally alone. She leaned her head back against the building and closed her eyes, resolving that she would survive this ordeal. She would make it through this terrible time in her life, this moment of living with low-lives and thugs. She would concentrate on surviving one day at a time. Evelyn knew she was meant for a luxurious life, not this pitiful existence living side-by-side gangsters and thieves. Surely, God was simply testing her. She needed to pass this test, and then God would reward her with the kind of life she was meant to enjoy.

The sound of footsteps broke into Evelyn's thought. Footfalls climbed the stairs and stopped at her side. Evelyn kept her eyes closed; hoping that whoever it was would walk on by. But whoever it was stayed put. She could feel his burning stare upon her skin. Evelyn opened her eyes. A boy with black hair stood before her. He looked slightly older, perhaps a year or two. Evelyn gave him a bored look, one that suggested she was not interested. He kept staring at her. Good Lord, when were boys going to stop drooling over her?

Even her own mother made Evelyn feel uncomfortable. From the moment she started having womanly changes Evelyn's mom flamed the fire. She'd say stuff like; "Isn't she a thing of beauty? The boys at Mother Mary's just can't keep their eyes off her womanly curves."

Mother Mary's. It seemed so long ago, so far away from the steps of Drake Middle School. The boy smiled at her and Evelyn felt her stomach turn.

His black hair hung in greasy strands covering his eyes. He was dressed a baggy pair of jeans that were four sizes too big for his waist and hung low enough to show off his bright red boxers. When he spoke it sounded as if he had a frog caught in his throat.

"You look like you could use a little pick me up. I got just what you need."

Evelyn said, "I don't use drugs!"

The dark-haired boy talked as if she were his best friend. "I know you're new here. What you want to do is get connected. Then Naydas will have to leave you alone. And if she don't - well then, I'll take care of her. Just say the word and I'll make Naydas pay for what she did."

"Connected?"

He smiled. "I'm with the Mobb. Nobody - and I mean nobody - messes with ya when you're with the Mobb. We're the best gang in the city. I saw what Naydas did to you. That's totally embarrassing. And believe me, now everyone knows that you're an easy mark. You're going to have every Blood chick, every Crips chick, and every West Side Mobb chick trying to slap you down. It makes them look tough in front of their gang. Now that wouldn't happen if you were connected. And, believe me, the Mobb is wicked-bad. No one will mess with you if you're with the Mobb."

"I'm not interested in any drugs. And, even if I were to join a gang, it surely wouldn't be one where a pimple-faced jerk tried to scare me into joining."

The Mobber moved even faster than The Daus. He picked Evelyn up, slamming her against Drake's wall. Evelyn's head hit the bricks and began to ring. She tried to focus on the dark-haired boy's face, but he was blurry.

Another head came into view. It was just behind the pimple-faced boy.

"Let her go, Skolnick." Bruno Vic Vizcarra was standing on the stoop. "I don't think she wants to join your gang."

The dark-haired boy took one look at Bruno. He released his grip on Evelyn and faced Bruno. "Ya know Vizcarra, one of these days you're going to get what's coming to ya."

"Sure I will Skolnick. But, it won't be when you're alone, now will it?" Bruno smiled in a manner that suggested he thought Johnny was a punk.

Johnny Skolnick didn't say a word. He simply walked past Bruno, down the stairs, and off toward the football field.

"I thought you went to San Francisco High. Aren't you in high school?" Evelyn didn't want to admit it, but she was glad to see sitting boy.

"I'm in eighth grade, same as you.

"Well, I didn't need your help, but thanks anyway." The bell rang. Evelyn opened the rear doors and walked down the hallway, leaving Bruno on the stoop.

Mr. Cornet's algebra class proved to be even more boring than Mr. White's U. S. History class. His voice was monotone and he seemed to read from some scripted teacher lesson booklet. Evelyn's mind drifted back to her father. She hated him. There was no doubt about that. He was the lowest form of worm that ever slithered through the soil of the earth. Evelyn spent the entire hour daydreaming ways that she could punish him.

"Young lady, were you planning to sleep here tonight? It's sixth period. Do you need help finding your next class?"

Evelyn looked up to find Mr. Cornet standing over her. The entire class had already left. She had been so engrossed, so consumed, fantasizing the destruction of her father that she hadn't noticed. She grabbed her books and stuffed them into her backpack. She just wanted to go home. She wanted this terrible day to be done. But, she had one more hour of school. How odd was that. She actually wanted to get home to her disgusting white-trash house. Anything was better than Drake Middle School.

She had taken three steps toward her Introduction to the Earth Sciences Class when a hand gripped her shoulder. Evelyn was certain Naydas had come back for more. She spun around, turning a little too quickly, and dropping her backpack to the floor. She tightened her face, preparing herself for another strike of the big girl's hand. But, Naydas was nowhere in sight. Instead, Evelyn stood face to face with a bright eyed Korean girl. Evelyn suddenly realized that this girl had been in every one of her classes. The girl always sat in the front of the class, never taking her eyes off her teacher. Evelyn thought her name was Tessa or something like that. She had a happy round face with black eyes that danced around in a delightful manner as she spoke.

"Boy, you're lucky Bruno saw that Mobber. Out of all the gangs in the city, they're the worst. Their last head got sent to juvi for..."

"What's Juvi?" Evelyn didn't know why, but Tessa, or whatever her name was seemed kind of fun.

"Juvi is short for juvenile prison. The Mobb's last head got sent there for killing someone. Now Johnny Skolnick is their head. Well, at least here at Drake. The real head is some thirty-five year old that lives up in the Financial District. Can you believe that? He's a ganger, a real killer and he lives in the Financial District. I guess he has some flat on top of the Chase Manhattan Bank Building, but he spends most his time over in the Cargo District making sure his inventory arrives safely."

"Inventory?"

"Boy, oh boy, Evelyn, don't you guys up in the Silver Spoon know anything? His inventory - his drugs. He gives them to all his heads, the guys like Johnny Skolnick, and then they go out and push the drugs in their schools and neighborhoods. He makes a lot of money, but it's bad karma."

"Karma? What's Kar..." Evelyn decided to end the conversation. "Forget it. It's been nice talking with you, Tessa, but I got to get to my next class."

"It's Tetsu, not Tessa. I'm Korean, not Southern. I'm Tetsu Wong." She shook Evelyn's hand more vigorously than Evelyn had expected. Evelyn turned and started walking to sixth period.

Tetsu followed her, walking directly to the front seat of the class and sitting down quietly. Evelyn took a seat about midway between Tetsu and the back of the room. She looked at her new friend and smiled. She liked Tetsu Wong.

After class Tetsu leapt out of her chair. She came rushing back to Evelyn. "I didn't mean to scare you before, you know, when I was talking about Mobb. Drake has a lot of cool students, students who just want to get a good education. Kids like me who want to go to college. I'm going to go to Stanford. Are you planning on going to college? Of course you are. Everyone knows you came from the Silver Spoon. Why did you end up going here anyway?"

Evelyn was surprised to see Tetsu actually stop to take a breath of air. She thought, my new little friend sure can talk. Evelyn smiled for the first time that day and said, "It's a long story."

"Well if you really want to be left alone from the gangs I mean - there is another way. His name is Red. He's not a gang head. He doesn't even have a gang, not really. He doesn't allow any drugs, so joining his gang won't ruin your life. Even Bruno Vic is going to meet him. Can you imagine that? Who would ever think that Bruno needed protection? Bruno doesn't back down to anyone."

Evelyn smiled, "I'll think about it."

"We're all going to see Red tomorrow after school. He's the only way you know; the only way to stay out of the gangs. All the gangs want Bruno to join, even the Mobb. Their last head, the one that got sent away - he wanted to turn Bruno into a Mobber; have Bruno Vic take his place as head. But Bruno said "No."

"It's too bad. Bruno probably would have made the Mobbers be nice and act like cops. That's what Bruno wants to be ya know. He wants to be a San Francisco cop like his dad was."

Evelyn got up and started walking toward the door. Tetsu matched her step for step. Evelyn headed down the hall and Tetsu kept right on talking, "There are basically four gangs here at Drake, the Mobbers, the Bloods, the Crips, and the Skinheads."

Evelyn looked into Tetsu's smiling eyes. "So who is Red?"

"Well, I never met him, but I know he doesn't do drugs. And, I guess all the gangs leave him alone. I think they're afraid of him. Like Johnny Skolnick is afraid of Bruno Vic, but Skolnick would never admit that."

Tetsu walked Evelyn to the corner of Van Ness Avenue and Eddy Street before she turned around and headed back toward her own home. She was different than any friend Evelyn had ever had. Evelyn was exhausted. She walked past the place where Bruno saved his mother, past the broken pieces of glass and up to her new home. Once inside she made her way to her room and fell face first into her bed. She only got up to eat a small dinner, then returned to her room and slept till morning.

CHAPTER 3

The bell rang and everyone spilled out the doors of Mr. White's U. S. History Class. Evelyn grabbed her lunch and headed to the rear of the school, finding a seat on the concrete steps where she had met the Mobber the day before. She leaned back against the brick wall. It was a sunny day in San Francisco and Evelyn started to feel a little better. She loved her solitude, and was just about to take a bite of her sandwich when the doors opened and Tetsu Wong stepped out.

"Boy, oh boy, did Mr. White have it in for you today or what? I wonder if he realized that he had thirty other students in there. He could have asked me a question. I always have my hand up. He never calls on me. I don't think he likes Koreans." She giggled at her own joke. "Isn't that funny? Mr. White is a racist against his own race."

Tetsu grabbed Evelyn by the hand and pulled her to her feet. "Come on. Everyone's meeting to discuss Red."

"Get your pasty white paws off of me. I just want to eat my lunch." Evelyn liked Tetsu, but she just wanted to be left alone.

"Come on, Evelyn. You know Johnny Skolnick, the guy who was here yesterday? Well, that's how they always start. A guy like Johnny tells you how great their gang is, how they can protect you. They offer you some drugs, and say that it will make you feel happy all the time. Pretty soon you're a user. Once you're a user, you can kiss any real life goodbye.

That's not for me. No way. But I'm tired, tired of every ganger out there trying to prove she's tough by slapping me down. I've been tripped in the hall, spat on, and one girl even grabbed me by the hair. She pulled so hard I ended up flat on my back. It was totally embarrassing; I almost wanted to join the Mobbers just so I could get even. But I'll never join one of those gangs.

Then I heard about Red. I guess he's really cool."

Tetsu pulled Evelyn from her stoop and headed down a small hill to the oval track. They walk through the center, crossing the football field and walking under the far field goal to another small hill. At the bottom of this hill was an abandon baseball diamond. Evelyn followed Tetsu, chewing on her sandwich as she walked.

The baseball diamond was the only place where the kids could talk without being bothered. At one time this diamond might have been a great ballpark. It had concrete dugouts, a high row of bleachers, and a field that stretched out before home plate. But now the grass field was filled with weeds and gopher holes. The dugouts and the bleachers had so much graffiti covering them that it was hard to imagine this place as anything but gang territory.

Evelyn's feet began to drag at the sight of this decrepit field. Five kids were waiting in the visitors' dugout. She recognized Bruno Vic, but it was Naydas that her eyes locked upon. The two girls stared one another down as Evelyn walked the final slope to the dug out. Evelyn couldn't believe Tetsu. How could she even consider bringing her to a meeting with the Naydas? She looked The Daus up and down, wanting to say something smart, wanting to embarrass her, and then run back to school. But she pushed the thought out of her head. The Daus would catch up to her later. It wasn't worth it. Evelyn's eyes scanned the other kids. The blonde boy was named Tommy. He seemed nice enough, and Mosi was the funny kid from her math class. The only one she didn't know was a bald kid who was sitting on the railing.

Howard Huxley sat on the pole that ran the length of the dugout. His head was shaven clean, and his eyes were as innocent as an over zealous puppy. Howard's hands stretched

outward as he teetered on the brink of falling backward. He seemed oblivious to everyone else in the dug out.

"Howard, if you don't sit still I'm going to smack you good and hard." Naydas let her eyes bug out a little.

"Oh, no. Oh, no. I'm falling." Howard teetered shouting louder, "Nooooo. I mean it I'm going to fall. Someone save me!"

Naydas's soft black skin drew tight about her lips and she glared at Howard. He swung his arms wildly, "Help!"

The Daus waddled her two hundred pounds of authority up to him. Her skin was silky soft, but stark white eyeballs showed her inner core. Howard froze, sitting perfectly still on the rail.

Without warning, Naydas leaned forward and shoved him hard. He flew backward. "There, you've fallen. Now get up. This is serious Howard. You're one of Red's. His favorite, I might add."

Howard lay in the dirt for a moment longer. He stood up, and walked quietly over to the dugout wall sitting down and tugging at his ear. His baldhead was covered in dirt. Tetsu quietly walked over and began brushing him off.

The Daus was center stage. Evelyn could tell that she loved it. In a loud voice, Naydas asked, "Questions?"

Mosi Maehat was the only other African American at this little meeting. He was slender, not much bigger than Howard. He raised his hand. "How do we know the other gangs will let us be?"

"Good question Mosi. Just look at Huxley." Naydas gestured toward the skinny, bald form of Howard sitting in the dugout. "If anyone is a prime example of the perfect target I think we'd all agree it would have to be Huxley. Have any of the gangs messed you Howard? I mean, since you joined Red."

Howard shook his head.

A big smile crossed Naydas's face. Her eyes moved to Evelyn's, and The Daus gave a quick wink. It was not a friendly wink. It was a hard wink, a wink that said, get out of line and I will kick your butt! Her pearly white teeth glistened as she spoke. "So, I guess I'll be seeing you all at Red's tonight?"

Everyone seemed to agree that Red was the answer. Still, all eyes moved to Bruno Vic. He was the only one that Naydas needed to sell. If Bruno joined everyone else would follow.

Evelyn had gotten a taste of the gang life here in the Tenderloin, and could see why Testu was so intent on getting protection. But when Bruno began to speak she felt something strange and exciting stir deep inside her.

"I've learned one thing from my father's death. No matter how tough you are, if enough of people jump you, you're going to lose. My father lost. I'm not going to. Right now the gangs leave me alone. But that won't last forever. I'm going to go see Red."

Bruno's voice was deep, and filled with authority. It reminded Evelyn of her first night on Eddy Street. Was that only two days ago? She wondered if Peter and Jed had returned the cords that Bruno had used to tie them, or if Bruno had gone after them as he had promised.

"It's settled then. We'll all meet at Red's house tomorrow at six-thirty. You all know where he lives, right?" The Daus glared at Evelyn. "If you get yourself lost, well, it's no skin off my back."

CHAPTER 4

Norman Fitzwald sat at his disheveled desk on the thirteenth floor of the Watermark Apartment Building. There were papers that hadn't been moved for a year and a half; buried by books and pamphlets that sat askew on his desk. A computer took up the entire back of Norman's desk. His long black hair looked as disheveled as the piece of furniture where he spent ninety-five percent of his waking hours.

From here Norman Fitzwald had access to virtually anything he wanted. Norman was a hacker who lived within a world of his own, floating from site to site within the web. His bone-thin fingers clicked away at the keys while his rat-eyes stared at the phone. Red never called on time.

Norman didn't like to go out into the real world. There were far too many dangers. The big man had been bringing Norman Fitzwald his groceries for the past two years, ever since Norman had told him his plan. Well, it had been no more than an idea back then. Nonetheless, Red had faithfully attended to Norman ever since. He no longer had to leave his small apartment for anything. And, the young punks who used to pound on the walls at all hours of the night had mysteriously stopped shortly after Red was told of Norman's idea.

But lately Red had a very short fuse. He seemed to blow up at the smallest setback. Norman was worried. He always got the jitters when the big man's temper was short. A month ago Norman had had a small setback. Red had gotten so mad he yanked the computer screen from the desk, ripping out all the lead wires. He walked over to Norman's balcony on the thirteenth floor and heaved it out into the open air. As it plunged toward the concrete below, Norman Fitzwald felt a part of himself falling into a bottomless pit. Then it hit the sidewalk, shattering into a million pieces. Norman couldn't see it, but the crashing sound was devastating. Red simply remarked that he felt a lot better.

The phone rang and Norman Fitzwald snatched it up before the first ring had completed. His chapped lips cracked anew as he answered, "Red."

"How's a plan coming?" Red sounded agitated.

"The Hunt should be ready in a day or two," Norman lied. He knew that only if he were lucky and there were absolutely no glitch's within his programming, which was highly unlikely, would he have The Hunt ready in time. But he was so scared of Red that he could only concentrate on the here and now. And right now Red was pleased, so Norman could breath easy.

"Good, Red hung up the phone.

Norman listened to the dial tone for some minutes before he could bring himself to hang up his phone. A moment later he was clicking away at his keyboard.

CHAPTER 5

Red's house was the last one on Laskie Street. Evelyn stood in the corner of his tiny living room. She refused to sit on any of the furniture for fear that something might stick to her blue jeans.

This place was disgusting. The coffee table sat between a couch so ratted that the springs showed in three places. Two lounge chairs, one of which was stuck in the fully reclined position, were opposite the couch. One of the reclining chair's footrests had been broken in half, the two ends hanging like a couple of villains on the gallows. Two salad bowls filled with jawbreakers sat amid a grime filled coffee table. At one end of the table was a lasagna noodle that had hardened, and now looked like some kind of new age art. At the other end of the table was a lump of something that might have been chewing tobacco at one time. By now it had morphed into a crystalline reminder of what nicotine could do to the inner wall of your lips. Evelyn covered her mouth and turned toward the window. She leaned close in an attempt to breathe the outside air.

Testu placed a hand on Evelyn's shoulder. "Are you okay Evelyn? You're not going to lose it, are you?"

Evelyn looked at Testu. Her skin was creamy white, so peaceful and clean it seemed out of place in this foul house. The other kids appeared oblivious to the filth. Even Bruno Vic, the young warrior chief - that's how Evelyn had come to think of him after learning that his father had been a full-blooded Navajo - sat on the filthy couch. Next to him were Mosi, Howard, and Tommy. The three other boys were twisting and turning, grinding whatever mold or fungus was on the couch into their jeans. Evelyn turned to the window for another breath of fresh air, hoping that she could hold down her lunch, which by now was making a noticeable effort at escape.

"What are we doing in this disgusting place?"

Evelyn looked green, not the stunning deep green of her eyes, but a pale yellow-green. Tetsu pushed Evelyn's strawberry-blond hair off her face.

"I need to stay. I'm tired of being scared. My apartment is smack-dab in the center of Turk Street. The apartment next to mine is overrun by the Mobbers. You remember Johnny Skolnick? Then you got the skinheads. Their flat is two blocks away on the corner of Hyde and McAllister. And lets just say that cute little Korean girls like me aren't their favorites. Actually, they hate everybody that isn't white, so they might like you. Oh, wait. No, they would hate you too because you and I are friends. They hate anyone who associates with an "impure". The Bloods control everything south of Mission, but they like to cruise down Turk looking for Skins to pop. Their head is Lawrence Crisp. He actually..."

Evelyn broke in, knowing once Tetsu got talking she might not stop. "But why do we have to join any gang? I like everybody." She looked over at Naydas, "Well, almost everybody."

A look of sympathy flashed in Tetsu's eyes.

Everyone knew about Evelyn's father. How he had taken off with another woman leaving Evelyn and her mother to fend for themselves. One of the girls from Evelyn's previous school had a cousin that went to Drake. The rumors were dealt out like a deck of cards before Evelyn even entered the halls of Sir Francis Drake Middle School.

Tetsu said, "It's a whole different world here in the Tenderloin District. And, San Francisco High is even worse. The only kids who are safe in high school are the ones that are connected, you know, in a gang. That's why we need Red."

"Yeah, but what if I just don't join any gang. Won't they leave me be?"

"Last year the Mobb went after a girl named Sara. Sara was invited to join them. Sound familiar? She refused. So their head, it wasn't Johnny back then, had his entire gang line up on the side of the hall after her science lab. Sara walks with a cane now. She's fourteen years old and she walks like a grandma. And get this - they still push her down.

I feel sorry for her, but there is nothing I can do. The teachers can't even stop the gangs. But for some reason, nobody messes with Red."

Bruno was sitting between to his two best friends, Mosi Maehat, and Tommy Sanstrom. Even sitting, Bruno looked ready for battle. His eyes moved to the slender form of Evelyn. He leaned close to Mosi. "She's got it, don't you think?"

Mosi was bore. He shrugged his shoulders. "She's white. You know white chicks don't do noth'n for me."

"She's gonna need our help. She's not used to life in the Tenderloin."

Evelyn's strawberry-blond hair was brushed into a long shimmering veil.

"She's like a gift sent to our broken world."

Tommy started to laugh. "You're loosing it Bruno."

Mosi reached the dangerous point of sheer boredom. He reached behind Bruno and tweaked Tummy's ear. Tommy had always been a bit of a hothead. He jumped up, leaping over Bruno and punched Mosi hard in the chest.

For a moment Mosi looked a little shocked. "What the... Oh no. It's the big one. I think I'm... HEART ATTACK." He jumped up clutching his chest. He started kicking and wheeling his arms, screaming as if he were about to die. Then his body when limp and he came down with a crash on the corner of the coffee table sending the two bowls of jawbreakers high into the air. The jawbreakers came showering down, bouncing off the furniture, floor, and kids alike. The entire room exploded into hysterical laughter as Mosi Maehat slowly stood up holding his side. "Oooweeee. That hurts."

Everyone loved Mosi. He was the funniest kid in the entire city. Up till now, even the older kids left Mosi alone because he was so funny. Mosi just stood there, holding his side. His dark-black face opened with a broad smile that showed gleaming white teeth. Mosi never planned his funny antics. They just seemed to happen. His eyes twinkled with delight.

The door slammed open. It bounced off the wall, back toward the person who had shoved it. Red kicked the door this time. He kicked it so hard that the doorknob went right through the plaster wall and stuck there. Red was immense, a full head taller than Bruno. His crimson hair was pulled into a tight ponytail that hung to the middle of his back. As he looked around the room at the kids, he ginned a reptilian smile. A red scraggly beard covered most of his wrinkled face. But the most terrifying thing about Red was his eye. One was normal, a brown color that shifted from face to face in an appraising manner. The other eye was milky white and had faint glints of blue deep within. The milky eye searched around in an attempt to see what the other eye saw, so that when Red looked at you, you couldn't help but stare back into that milky ball.

Evelyn was reminded of a program on The Nature Planet. There was this old crocodile that had almost lost its eye in a battle. All that was left was a sightless white orb. The crock was more dangerous than ever as it slithered through the water, waiting for a deer to enter.

Evelyn moved back against the window, hoping the milky eye would look right past her. All the kids seemed to be having second thoughts; all except Bruno Vic. Bruno sat calm as could be.

"Sounds like you girls are having a bit of fun. You done messed up my home, damn-it. Who's responsible."

Evelyn couldn't tell if Red was really mad or if he was kidding. Sometimes mean people like to pretend that they're mad, but they're really not. They just want to see you squirm a little.

Mosi was standing in the center of the room. He was still holding his side where he slammed into the table. He held his hand up indicating that he would like to say something.

"This ain't no damn school room. You have something to say, why you just spit it out." Red waited only a moment then screamed, "Now!" His crock-eye quivered.

"Well - you see it was not really any persons fault... not really. You see this table here... well..." Mosi could hardly breathe, "Well it just broke. Not the whole table, just this leg." He bent down and picked it up, showing the splintered end to Red. "I'd be happy to fix it for you."

"Are you that black boy that's supposed to be so damn funny?" Red's eyebrows arched a little easing the tension within the room.

"Well, uh. I am black."

Everyone started to giggle.

Red's angry voice silenced the room. "Because that weren't funny, damn-it."

One look at Mosi and everyone knew he was so scared he could barely think.

He blurted out, "Funny. I'm to damn scared to be..."

Mosi didn't have a chance to finish. Red was across the room. He caught Mosi by the shirt collar, carrying him as if he weighed nothing and slammed him against the wall. Mosi's head hit hard and the big man's milky eye stared blindly into Mosi's.

Everybody cringed and sunk further into the background. Kids standing by the wall tried to blend in with the 1960s wallpaper. All eyes were fixed on Red.

Bruno Vic stood up.

"I don't allow no cussing. No cussing." Red was yelling again. He opened his big hand and dropped Mosi to the ground.

Mosi scurried back to the couch. He sat with his knees close together, the way he did in church when he was with his parents.

Red took a deep breath. "I don't allow no damn swearing. It ain't proper. I don't allow no drugs either damn-it! They make you crazy. Anything else, I don't care. But no damn drugs and don't be swear'n neither!"

Bruno walked over to Red. He stared up at him, looking first into his brown eye and then into the milky orb.

"My mom started drinking the day my dad died. She didn't let anyone into the house for six months. Then a neighbor knocked on our door. He said that he wanted to do the neighborly thing, to offer some moral support. At first he was nice, and I was happy because my mom was laughing again.

But then he changed. Laughter turned to screams of anger. He unleashed, knocking my mom to the ground. I was only seven at the time. I hid under his bed, crying for my dad to come back, to stop this crazy man. But my dad wasn't coming back. It was up to me, and only me, to help my mom. My fear turned to rage. I crawled out from under my bed. I grabbed my aluminum baseball bat and came up behind that bastard. I swung that bat as hard as I could. I hit him between the legs."

Red gave a reptilian smile. "Touching story."

"I don't like it when bullies pick on people weaker than them. Every one knows that the gangs leave you alone. Some say it's because you're crazy."

"From what I hear, they leave you alone too. You don't have to be here Bruno. As a matter of fact, you can leave right now."

Bruno's gaze shifted to Red's milky eye. "I don't know. Maybe they're right. Maybe you are crazy. Crazy I can deal with. So long as you're no bully, we're okay."

"Don't stay on my account boy."

"I'll stay. I won't swear and I won't ever do drugs. But, I'm not going to sit back and watch you throw my friends around either."

Red bent low so that his milky eye was only an inch from Bruno Vic's. With a tilt of his head he said, "Crazy? I ain't no damn crazy fool." He started to laugh. It was a big barrel laugh that seemed to be contagious because soon everyone in the room was laughing.

Red raised his right hand, "I promise I will not throw nobody around no more - damn it."

Evelyn wondered if Red could compose a sentence without the word "damn" in it.

"Naydas, hurry up and come on over here."

Naydas Rascondas never hurried anywhere. When Mr. Phillips tried to get her to run during P.E. she would simply swing her arms a little bigger, as if that made her look to be running.

"I believe you all know Naydas. You sure should. She goes to your damn school."

The kids nodded and some waved, as if they had just noticed that she was there. Red gave Naydas a gentle shove back to her seat, "Howard, come here, damn you."

Howard Huxley was a little weird. When other kids got a flat top haircut, Howard had his mother shave his head bald. He stood now tugging on his ear.

"Now I know that you all know Howard here.. Hell, he goes to your damn school too."

It was obvious that Howard was Red's very favorite. He put him in a soft headlock, gave him a light nuggy, and then gently pushed him away. "Now get the hell back to your seat Howard."

Mosi raised his hand and timidly said, "Isn't hell a swear word, Mr. Red?"

Red's head tilted to the side, and his milky eye started to quiver. Evelyn could almost see that old crocodile lunging for the deer.

"No, it ain't no damn swear word; it's from the Bible. The Bible ain't no swear word. Now, don't interrupt me no more; I got places I got to get off to.

So you see, I really don't have no gang, just a few kids who I offer a little protection to. Do you have any question?"

Evelyn had a question. She was wondering why Red was doing this. Why was he offering anyone his protection? He certainly didn't seem like the type of guy who liked being around kids. On the contrary, it seemed that Red hated kids. It occurred to Evelyn that Red had to be getting something from this little gang of his, or he wouldn't be offering his protection. Evelyn wondered what that might be. For now, it was a question that Evelyn would keep to herself.

CHAPTER 6

The next morning Tetsu couldn't stop talking. She sat next to Evelyn in her first three classes going on and on about Red. As far as Tetsu was concerned, he was the answer to all her problems.

By the time Evelyn and Tetsu arrived at the meeting, everyone was sitting inside the graffiti filled dugout. The scene was much like the day before. Howard Huxley was teetering upon the dugout railing. Bruno stood before Tommy, and Mosi looking as if he had the weight of the world upon his shoulders.

Evelyn felt sorry for Bruno. He was big and strong yet she saw something in Bruno Vic that no one else did. Perhaps it was the loss of her own father that made it possible for Evelyn to see into the depth of Bruno. He was scared too. Not scared like everyone else, not scared of the gangs, but scared of being alone. He needed to be held, to have someone tell him that they would never leave him. Evelyn wanted to go to Bruno, to hold his hand and whisper, "I won't abandon you. I'll stay by your side."

But then Evelyn came to her senses. She remembered that this was the Tenderloin District. She could never stay here. And that meant that one day she would abandon Bruno.

Evelyn resolved that Red's little gang might be a temporary necessity. But once she had the chance, Evelyn and her mother would be back in the Silver Spoon where they belonged.

Howard Huxley was repeating his antics of yesterday. He sat on the same railing swinging his arms as if he were about to tip over. The Daus wasn't going to waste any time on Howard today. She simply walked up to him and pushed him over. She leaned over the railing, glaring down at Howard. "There, you've fallen. Now get up. Fool around and I'll pop you so hard - you'll think it's nighttime and all the stars are out."

Howard ducked under the railing. He headed quietly over to the dugout where he sat tugging on his ear. His baldhead was covered in dirt. Tetsu walked over and began brushing him off.

Naydas looked around at the three boys. Her eyes glared at the sight of Evelyn standing next to Tetsu and Howard. But, she smiled in spite of herself. She was center stage again. "So what do you all say? Is this great or what? Has anyone been hassled today?" The Daus gave a gleaming white smile of satisfaction. "Red wants us at his house again tonight. I guess he has some initiation. Says it's no big deal, just a proof of loyalty. So who's in?"

Tommy blurted, "Did you see what he did to Mosi? I don't know? What if he gets mad again?"

"Suits me fine, you idiot. What do you think the Mobbers, or the Bloods will do to ya when you don't want to join their gang. Do you think they're just going to pat you on the head and say, "Okay, Tommy boy, you don't have to join our gang?" I don't think so. I bet you already know what they'll do, don't you?" The Daus was practically screaming now. "Don't you, Tommy?"

"Wait a minute. I didn't say I wasn't going to join Red. I'm just a little worried he might wig out again, that's all."

"Well, just remember the gangs don't bother Red. One reason is because he is crazy. Another reason is because he doesn't do drugs, so he's not stealing any of their precious business. Everyone knows Red is crazy. Of course, you would have to be insane to say that right to his face."

She paused to give Bruno one of her hard looks. "So Red's a little crazy. Who isn't? Are any of the other gangs' heads sane? I think not. But with Red you don't have to do drugs, and that's why you should all join up."

Bruno moved away from the dugout and stared at the field before him. When he spoke it was as if he were speaking to someone that was not even there. "I'm not afraid of anyone, crazy or otherwise." He faced his friends. "I just don't know about Red. But I'll tell you this; it's not right for a grown man to throw a kid like Mosi around the way Red did last night. And, if I join up with a guy like that - just so I don't get hassled by the gangs in this town - well, then I'm not much of a friend, am I?"

Evelyn's eyes turned into soft green pools of admiration. It was frustrating; the draw of attracted that Bruno had over her. He held himself accountable to high values that most people only spoke of. She remembered her father talking all high and mighty, comparing himself to coworkers and saying that they had no morals, yet look at what he had done to his very own family. Evelyn found herself wanting to rush up to Bruno. She imagined grabbing him by the collar and pulling him close. She wanted to tell him that she would never leave him like her father had left her, or turn to alcohol like Bruno's mother had. Maybe she could find a way to help Bruno, to get him and his mother out of the Tenderloin. If she had the chance to prove it, Evelyn would be there to comfort him.

Naydas's harsh words broke into Evelyn thoughts. "That's beside the point, Bruno. The point is, yes. Red is a little crazy in the head. I don't think anyone will deny that. But, that is exactly why none of the gangs mess with him. That's why we're part of his gang, me and Howard. No one messes with us."

"Shut up Naydas." Evelyn turned on the big girl. She didn't like Naydas talking to Bruno that way, and her stupidity was more than Evelyn could handle. "It's Howard and I, not me and Howard, you idiot. Haven't you learned anything yet? My god, I learned that in the second grade."

For a moment it looked like The Daus might explode. Her eyelids pulled back exposing the round white part of her eyes. Evelyn took a small step backward.

Naydas glared. "Me and Howard are not bothered by any gangs. If you would like that kind of protection, then I think you should join up with Red!" She turned to Bruno. "Maybe it doesn't matter to you, because the gangs leave you alone. I wonder how everyone else feels. Tommy, did anyone spit on the floor as you walked by today?"

Tommy shook his head.

"Tetsu, did that girl from the Mobb shove you today?"

"No."

"Evelyn, did Johnny visit you today?"

Evelyn shook her head. She had to admit; today was a pretty easy day.

Mosi spoke up. "If I'm the only reason you guys don't want to join up with Red then you should just join. Don't put that kind of guilt on me. I mean..." He jumped up from the bench and stood next to Bruno. "I don't see what the big deal is. So big Red pushed me around a little." He made goofy face mimicking Red. "Damn it. I probably deserved it. Damn it. Damn it all the way to hell, which by the way is not a swear word. It's from the Bible."

Everyone started to laugh. For a moment Evelyn even forgot that she was in the heart of the Tenderloin. She could see why he was one of Bruno's best friends. Even Howard stopped tugging his ear and began to laugh.

Mosi continued. "I think we all know that Red might be a little dangerous. As for me, I'm going to join. The gangs won't ever let up, not until you join one of them. I guess if I have to choose one, it may as well be Red's."

The fifth period bell rang and everyone headed back to class. Evelyn, Tetsu, and Howard ran ahead. Bruno, Tommy, and Mosi quickly caught up to them. But Naydas had her own pace. Her teacher could wait a few minutes.

CHAPTER 7

Norman Fitzwald was ecstatic. Holding a can of jolt cola in his bone-thin fingers he danced with some imaginary woman listening to the sound of his computer as it played the theme song to the Flintstones. He danced round and round in his cluttered little apartment. He was thinking about how proud Red would be when he showed him his discovery. He had done the impossible. He had completed The Hunt, his virtual reality game that would change everything. But how would he explain his accomplishments to Red? Red simply didn't have the intelligence to understand such complicated computer technology. Norman lost his balance for a moment. The mere thought of Red could send Norman into a thither. He stumbled backward and slammed into the corner of a glass coffee table. Norman grabbed his calve, still balancing his can of Jolt.

Although Norman was alone in his small apartment, he heard his imaginary girlfriend call out to him. "What's wrong Normy?"

Norman Fitzwald shouted, "Confound it! He gets me so nervous!"

Norman changed the tone of his voice so that he sounded like a woman. His imaginary girlfriend spoke in a soothing voice. "You're talking about Red again, aren't you?"

The deep voice of a man returned, "Yeah, it's Red all right."

The high-pitched voice replied, "I wish you wouldn't associate with him. I think he is dangerous. If anything should happen to you Normy, why I would just die."

Norman imagined Betty running her fingers through his long black hair. In Norman's mind Betty Rubble had come to life from his favorite childhood cartoon, the Flintstones. She was his one and only girlfriend.

"Oh, Normy, let's just dance. Let's just listen to the music of our computer and dance our lives away."

Norman looked into the air before him. Although there was no one there, he saw the beautiful form of Betty Rubble. She had dark hair combed back into a perfectly formed ponytail. Her stark white skin was so perfect without a single blemish. For a moment Norman wondered why she had chosen him out of all the men in the world. She was so beautiful. She could have any man she wanted; yet she wanted him, Norman Fitzwald. He pulled her close. "Okay, lets dance."

Norman switched back to the high-pitched voice of Betty again. "And no more talk of Red. I don't like him. He scares me."

"He scares me too, Betty." Norman took a long draw on his can of Jolt, emptying it as he danced by himself around his living room.

Red stood outside Norman Fitzwald's apartment door listening as Norman talked to himself. It sounded as if Norman had conjured Betty Rubble out of his imagination again. Red couldn't help but laugh when he heard Norman speaking in that high-pitched voice that was supposed to be Betty. She was saying that she was afraid of Red. Red liked that. He sat down, leaning against the door. He liked that Norman was so afraid of him. He decided to give Norman a few moments alone was Betty.

He laid his head back against the door and listened to the footsteps of Norman dancing with himself. After some time, he thought, enough. It's time to get to business. Red stood up and burst into the room. Norman was in the middle of some big dance maneuver. His arms were outstretched, holding the imaginary Betty Rubble above the couch. Norman was standing up on the couch with one foot on the seat cushion and the other on the backrest. He was

humming along with his computer as the music blared out, Flintstones. Meet the Flintstones. They're the modern stone aged family. He was about to kiss Betty, but at the sight of Red, Norman's blood turned to ice.

Red's reptilian face broke into a big grin, "How's Betty doing?"

Norman looked shocked. His chapped lips cracked a little as he replied, "She's fine. You scared her away." Betty Rubble had vanished at the sight of Red. Norman's outstretched arms began to shake with fear.

Red decided to tease Norman a little today. He knew he had to be careful. Norman was already quite close to the brink, but Red just couldn't resist. "By the way, Normy, does Barney know about you and Betty?" Red already knew the answer, but he loved hearing Norman's explanation.

"I've already explained this to you, Red. She's not really married to Barney. They were only married in the cartoon. They're actors. In real life she's single. She is dating me and one day I hope to marry her."

"She's a cartoon character, you loony-toon. In real life she has no life. She's not alive. She never was, Norman!" Red was laughing loudly now.

"Red, you can be so frustrating. I brought her to life with my computer. She's real now! But, I have told you all this before. Why don't you get it? I was working with the virtual reality program, the one that you are going to be using. I found her in her cartoon form. She was simply floating around within another dimension that exists just beyond our reach. But I brought her to life. Through the power of my computer I brought her to life." Norman had tears in his eyes.

Red wanted to send Norman right over the deep end. He wanted to tease and taunt him until his mind simply snapped. Norman Fitzwald would turn into a vegetable. But Red held himself in check. Now was not the time. Red would have his fun with Norman after they stole the money. When he no longer needed Norman that was when he would tease and taunt him until that frail little mind snapped. But for now, Red needed Norman. He decided to change the subject. "So, Norman, how's The Hunt coming along?"

Norman's mood changed instantly. He had done the impossible. A day ago he had lied to Red when he told him that he had almost finished The Hunt. A day ago it was an impossible task. Yet that is exactly what Norman had done. He hopped off the couch and ran over to Red. "I am so happy to tell you that The Hunt is done. It works. I finished it, and it's all set to go." Norman held up a shiny black helmet with a darkened visor and said, "Would you like to give it a try?"

Red smiled. His face was shadowed and dark save for his teeth and his one milky eye. He thought about how Norman had become more and more delusional ever since he had first put on that helmet. As a matter of fact, it was not long after Norman started testing out The Hunt that he brought Betty Rubble to life, or so he had thought. At first Norman's delusions were only within the confines of his computer. Norman would go into his computer and take Betty out on a date within his virtual world. But lately Norman's imagination was bringing her to life without the use of the helmet. Now he was having a relationship with her; dancing with her and thinking that he would soon be married. It would be a cold day in hell before Red put that helmet on. "No thanks, Norman. Just tell me how the damn thing works."

Norman sat on the couch. "It works like this. You give this helmet and The Hunt Disc to one your little gang members. They take it to their parents' work, and insert the disc into the company's computer. As they play the game, the program will run itself. That's where it gets a little complicated." Norman paused to take a deep breath. "Simply put, your little gang members will think that they are just playing a game. But in reality the game isn't really a game

at all. It's a computer hacking program. While your gang members are playing it, The Hunt Disc is hacking into the computer. Once it discovers the primary user's password, The Hunt logs onto the internet. That's where I'll be waiting. The Hunt will connect the host computer with mine, and then it's as easy as stealing candy from a baby. I simply log in to the company's bank using the host computer's identification number and password. Then I withdraw as much money as I want. I have already set us up a bank account in Copiapo Chile like you asked. It's a foreign bank, so once our money is deposited there's no getting it back." Norman was smiling almost as wide as Red now.

Red's laughter changed to an excited, giddy outburst. "And the next day when the owners come into work they find out that they are bankrupt." Red laughed harder and harder until he fell back into the couch. "I would love to be able to see their faces." Red looked at Norman. "And you have two helmets, right?"

"Yes."

"I'm going to be a rich man. It's time that little gang of mine started earning their keep." Red's face turned determined again. He stood up, grabbing the two helmets and walked out the door without saying another word.

CHAPTER 8

His recruits were just outside his door, and Red felt his plan coming together. He smiled calling out, "Come on in damn-it! The door is open. Sit down; I got some good news for you all."

Everyone piled into Red's tiny living room. Red watched as Evelyn Rose entered. Naydas Rascondas walked right into the kitchen and helped herself to a piece of cold pizza that was sitting on the counter.

"Naydas, get your butt in here and sit down."

Naydas did that waddling walk of hers - swinging her arms as if she was hurrying, but walking all the same. She arrived in the living room with the wedge of cold pizza in her hand, and said, "I'm right here Red! Don't get your undies in a bind."

"Just sit down and listen, damn it." Red reminded himself that he needed Naydas. He would be finished with her and her little friends soon enough. They would quite probably lose their minds just like Norman. He smiled at the thought. While these little do-gooders were dancing with imaginary girlfriends, he would be in Copiapo, Chile. He would be living in a lavish mansion with his stepbrother, Tim Hogenson. His stepbrother had to flee the country about eight years ago. It was either that or spend the next twenty-five years Henshaw Maximum Security State Prison. Tim chose Copiapo.

Norman had no idea why Red had chosen Copiapo, but then again Norman had little understanding about any of Red's plans. As a matter of fact, if Norman had any idea of what Red had in store for him, Norman would run and hide.

Once everyone was seated Red said, "I see you all have decided you want my protection. That's fine. You can all join my little gang but remember the rules. There's no swearing, and no drugs." Red stood up and paced back and forth in front of his new gang members. "Oh, yeah, and there's one more thing. There will be an initiation in order to join this gang. It's sort of a test to see if you're smart enough, and brave enough to be in my gang. It's a virtual-reality game that you must play. If you are too scared to play, or not smart enough to finish the game, then you're out. You're on your own. I'll have no damned scaredy-cats, and no damned idiots in my gang."

Howard Huxley stood up. "But, Red, that doesn't include me and Naydas does it? I thought we were already part of your gang."

"Howard, I got to raise the bar. I can't have no stupid idiot in my gang. Now if you're afraid you're not going to make it then I suggest you go home and start studying. But don't worry. You got a little bit of time. I'm going to start with Naydas." He turned and looked at Naydas.

Naydas started to laugh. "Red, I ain't even got no computer. How am I ever supposed to pass your stupid initiation when I ain't got no computer?"

Red smirked at her. "Well, now I am worried about you, Naydas. That's not a good sign of intelligence. You need to think a little harder than that. Doesn't your mama have a job?"

Naydas had just taken a bite and had half the pizza hanging from her mouth while the other half hung limply in her hand. She stood there chewing her pizza.

Red glared at her with his one good eye. "Naydas, all you got to do is take the game, it's called The Hunt, to your mother's work. You can play it there."

Red turned to face Evelyn. "You'll get the other game. I have two games, so each of you can try one at the same time. If you get to the tenth level..." Red didn't even know if there were

levels, much less if there were ten of them. But, it sounded good so he continued, "If you get to the tenth level you're in. You've passed the initiation, and you will have the protection of being part of my gang." Red glared from one face to another with his good eye, while his milky one drifted about the room in an attempt to find something to focus upon.

Mosi Maehat jumped to his feet. It had been all he could do to wait until now. "Virtual-reality, when do I get to play? I love video games! I'm good too! I know I'll be smart enough to get to the tenth level. And, I never get scared, not in video games."

"Oh, you'll get your turn, funny boy!" Red's milky eye looked down at Mosi. Of course Mosi would get a chance. After all, Mosi was the one reason Red had decided to start this little gang of his. Mosi's father worked at Wasserman International. Wasserman imported cheap crystals from Singapore, and Taiwan, and then used those crystals to manufacture electrical equipment, which they exported all over the world. Needless to say, Wasserman International was a multi-billion dollar corporation. They owned three buildings on the San Francisco Peninsula. Their warehouse was in the Cargo District close to the docks. The raw materials arrived in ships and were unloaded. From there the crystals were moved to a large warehouse across the street. This was the Wasserman Manufacturing Plant, where the crystals were manufactured into electrical equipment. Then the electrical fixtures were brought back to the warehouse and shipped all over the world. The Chief Executive Officer of the company, Mr. Wasserman himself, all over saw this. He worked on the top floor of the Transamerica Pyramid Building in the heart of the Financial District.

There were three sets of financial controllers who reported directly to Mr. Wasserman. Mosi's father was a second-level controller. He reported to one of Mr. Wassermann's financial controllers. It was a good job, and the Maehats were one of the wealthier families in the Tenderloin District, but unfortunately his job did not pay enough for the Maehats to afford a house in the Silver Spoon.

Red smiled as he thought about Mr. Maehat. He was the perfect target. His job allowed him access to the Wassermann's banking information, not enough so that Red could steal all of Wassermann's money, but he could certainly steal a few million.

Naydas and Evelyn would be Red's test. After all, he was counting on Norman Fitzwald, a man who was having romantic dinner dates with a cartoon character. Red needed to be sure that The Hunt worked. He would have the two girls take the game and play it at their parents' work. He and Norman would steal a little money, not enough for anyone to notice; just enough for Red to be sure that Norman wasn't totally loony. Then they would move on to Red's real target, Wasserman International. They would be sideswiped, hit so unexpectedly that they wouldn't even miss the five or six million dollars that Red planned to steal until the next morning when first level controllers did their daily reconciliation. By then Red would be well on his way to Chile.

Mosi jumped to his feet, raising his hand as if he were in class and wanted to answer a question. "The Hunt. I wonder what you have to Hunt, or is something Hunting you? Wow, this sounds great! Do you think..."

"Shut up, you damn idiot. You'll just have to wait your turn." Red had been happy only a moment ago. Now he was mad again, so mad he could hardly breathe. He knew he needed to test it before he sent Mosi into the Wasserman International. He wanted to throw Mosi around a little, just to release some tension, but he thought better of it.

Evelyn sighed. "Excuse me Red. This Hunt thing, it sounds really great, but I am not really into fantasy games. Mosi can take my turn."

"Can I? Are you serious? Thanks. Red, can I?" Mosi moved from the couch like some circus clown and started dancing around the room. "I shall be the first. I shall be the first. Not you, Tommy boy, but me!" He was pointing at Tommy now. "I will be the first."

Red snatched him by the collar and lifted him up so that their faces were only inches apart. "I will be the one to decide who gets to use play The Hunt." He put Mosi down again and looked at the Evelyn. "You will play The Hunt first. That is, unless you don't want to be part of my gang."

Evelyn said, "What's the big deal? Why was it so important that I used The Hunt before Mosi? What is this virtual-reality game all about anyway?"

The entire room went silent for a moment. Red took a moment to calm himself and came up with the perfect lie.

"I want the girls to play the game first. I don't want none of you boys telling the girls where the scary parts are, or how to defeat the game."

It did make sense. All the boys played video game whenever possible, but none of the girls were very interested in them. Everyone seemed to buy his lie, so he said, "I'm glad you all decided to join my little gang. No one will mess with you anymore. And if they do, I'll mess with them. Remember, my initiation is just this game. Other gangs' initiations are much worse. Other gangs jump you. They have all their gang members jump you - they beat the holy living tar out of you. That's their way of testing your salt, of seeing if you're tough enough and loyal enough, or something like that. But don't worry. I'm not a violent man, and I won't be jumping no one. You all have my protection for now. Just pass this easy virtual-reality game and you'll have my protection for the rest of your life."

Red thought to himself, Of course, I don't plan on letting any of you live too long. He smiled and handed Naydas and Evelyn a shining black helmet and a computer disc.

"It's quarter past ten, so get out of here before your parents start crying because they don't know where their babies are." Red walked his little gang to the front door and ushered them all out. He closed the door behind them and slid the dead bolt into place, locking them within the harsh world of the Tenderloin District.

Once outside, Mosi pulled Bruno Vic and Tommy aside. "Hey, lets have a little fun. Let the girls go a head. I want to scare them."

Evelyn and Tetsu were walking to the opening of Red's dead end street. They turned north on Mission and headed toward Eighth Street. They would take Eighth across Market where it turned into Hyde and follow that back to Eddy Street. Mosi, Tommy and Bruno turned right off of Laskie. They headed south on Mission, running into Ninth Street and turning north. They got to Market before the girls and shot across it to where Ninth turned into Larkin. Mosi was panting now, leading Tommy and Bruno to a small ally between Grove Street and Fulton. He turned up the ally and stopped.

"Remember those two girls?" Mosi was breathing hard, but his shadowed face sparkled with mischief. "They were found in that house right over there." Mosi pointed to the backside of a broken down building. "We'll jump out as they walk past. They'll be so scared they'll pee their pants."

Tommy started jumping from one foot to the other. "Cool! This is going to be so cool!"

Naydas had been following the girls, but stopped to tie her shoe. Howard stood tugging on his ear, waiting patiently for the big girl. By the time Naydas finished, Evelyn and Tetsu were swallowed by the darkness that shrouded the city of San Francisco.

It was dark. Evelyn listened to the sound of tires as cars wheeled down Market. It was amazing how alone you could feel in the middle of a big city. But this was the Tenderloin, no

one was going to stop and help a fourteen-year-old girl, and if they did, you had to wonder about their motive.

"Where is Bruno?"

"Don't know."

"Boys can be so unpredictable."

Evelyn was scared, but pushed her fear aside - happy to be out of Red's filthy home. She held the helmet by the strap, swinging it back and forth in an attempt to push away an uneasy feeling. She had a feeling that something awful was about to happen. Was it simply the fact that all the streetlights had been shot out, and the night was pitch black? Or was it the fact that she was being manipulated into playing this stupid game? Evelyn decided to get home as fast as she could.

"Come on, Tetsu, let's run."

They only ran a half block before Tetsu pulled up, grabbing Evelyn by the arm.

"Hang on. That's the house. Those poor girls. Do you think we should cross the street?"

"No. Don't be like that. It's just a house." At the same, a tingling feeling ran up Evelyn's spine. She pushed the thought away, assuring herself that it was just nerves. It was nothing more than the darkness of the night. Tetsu looked up at Evelyn. She placed a reassuring hand on Evelyn's shoulder.

"Come on."

Tetsu and Evelyn started walking. They were close to Fulton, when a cool breeze began to blow in from the Pacific Ocean. It whipped up and over the mansions within the Silver Spoon and down into the Tenderloin. Evelyn was cold. She didn't like being in this part of the city after dark. She looked at the house one more time. Naydas had told Evelyn and Tetsu about two girls who were walking down this very street. They had left a slumber party on a dare and never made it back to the party.

"Those poor girls. They say their clothes were ripped to shreds. Naydas said their bodies were swimming in a pool of their own blood." Tetsu stared at the house with its broken windows and busted in door. She gripped Evelyn's hand. "Maybe we should have followed the boys."

A car sped by. It turned on Market and the girls were left alone once again. They stared at the building, seemingly unable to move. A single piece of paper was picked up and swirled round and round on the strong currents of air. The paper floated silently toward Evelyn landing in her hair and sending her into a fearful fit. She screamed, then dropped the helmet, grabbing Tetsu by the arm, and yanking her - running for Eddy Street some six blocks away. Her only thought was to get past his house. If she could get past the house she would be safe. Three figures stepped out from behind the abandoned home. They rushed to the sidewalk, blocking the girls' escape. It was too late to stop and run in the other direction. They were too close. Evelyn turned on her speed, heading directly toward them. Her plan was to run full-tilt until the last instant, then dodge to the side like a football player avoiding a tackle. She only hoped that Tetsu could keep up. She pulled her as if Tetsu were a small child. Evelyn knew that no matter what happened she would not leave Tetsu. Evelyn's father had left her behind. She would not do that to her new friend.

The three figures formed a wedge, blocking their path. Evelyn tried to dart to the left, but they were too quick. The three men moved in on the girls, tackling them. They wrapped their arms about the girls, and brought them down.

Evelyn lost her grip on Tetsu's arm. She turned her head so that her shoulder took the brunt of the impact. The asphalt ripped through her blouse and blood began to ooze from a

deep scrape on her shoulder. Searing pain ran through her entire body. A moment later, one of the men grabbed her by the collar and started dragging her toward the abandoned house.

A red Oldsmobile slowed its brakes squeaking loudly. The driver looked out at the three men holding the two girls, but his eyes were wide with fear. He turned his head forward and hit the accelerator speeding off toward Hyde Street.

CHAPTER 9

Mosi explained, "I heard Naydas telling Evelyn and Testu about those two girls - you know ñ the ones they found in that abandoned building. Tetsu and Evelyn looked scared. So, lets have some fun. Lets give them the scare of their lives."

Tommy kept jumping excitedly. "Cool! Lets do this!"

Mosi led Bruno and Tommy around the backside of the abandoned building. He chuckled, "We have to wait until the girls are right in front. Then we'll jump out and grab them."

They jogged around the building keeping as quiet as possible. But when they got to the north side of the building three figures were already waiting for the girls.

The three figures in front of Mosi and his friends were not going to simply give the girls a scare. They were there for the real deal. Bruno looked over at Mosi. He could see that Mosi was trying to move his feet, but that they had become one with the concrete below. Fear gripped Mosi so tightly he could only watch what was about to happen. Bruno's eyes moved to Tommy Sanstrom. Tommy turned and ran. Perhaps he was running back to Red's for help, or maybe he was just running away, Bruno didn't know.

Bruno was a Navajo warrior again. He reached out and gripped Mosi's shoulders. "I need you Mosi. I can't do this alone." Bruno bent down, tearing off his shoes. He pulled at his long socks, removing them as quickly as he could.

"What the hell are you doing? Tetsu and Evelyn are about to be killed, or worse, and you ñ you decide you don't like your socks?"

Bruno handed Mosi his socks. "Find some rocks and stuff them into these." Bruno was on the ground again, pulling his shoes back on and tying the laces tightly.

From behind the house they heard Evelyn's scream of terror. The three men took off. They ran to the center of the street and formed a wedge, blocking the girls from any escape.

Bruno crouched like a cunning warrior. He peered into the darkness watching for Mosi's return. Mosi gathered chunks of broken concrete from the dilapidated building. He stuffed a few into each sock.

Bruno's heart was beating like a war drum. He needed to attack. He grabbed the socks from Mosi and tied a knot at the end just about the bulge of broken concrete. Each sock was about a foot long with a knot of concrete the size of a large orange at the end. He kept one for himself and handed the other to Mosi.

"Come on," Bruno stalked his prey. He moved silently.

Mosi looked at the sock. "What am I supposed to do with..." Then it hit him. Bruno had constructed a crude sock-rock weapon.

Bruno was running toward the three men. Mosi ran after.

The biggest of the three was the first to hear Bruno. His name was Marek Savaski and he was a mammoth of a man. He was two full heads taller than Bruno, standing six-feet, seven-inches tall. His chest was big and round, and no one had ever taken him down. He grabbed at Bruno.

Bruno leapt to the side bringing the sock-rock weapon around in a whirling arc that wrapped about Marek's massive head, smashing into his oversized nose. There was an audible crunching sound as the chunks of concrete broke cartilage within the big man's nose. He staggered backward, but refused to go down. His eyes were watering. Bruno pulled back on the sock-rock recoiling for another blow.

Marek swatted at Bruno. He struck him in the face. Bruno flew back landing hard. Everything was spinning, but he refused to stay down. He rolled backward, rotating around like an Indian hunter and landed on all fours.

Mosi let out a wild scream. He was running full tilt, his sock-rock weapon whirling up and down, round and round, like the blades a high-powered fan. The sock-rock found its mark directly between the big man's legs.

Marek let out a groan. His eyes crossed.

Bruno leaped onto Marek's back. He swung his rock-laden weapon about Marek's head one last time. The chunks of concrete struck the big man in the forehead, knocking him unconscious. Marek went down.

Bruno moved to the second man. Tim Conley was Marek's cousin, but he was nothing like him. Where Marek was mammoth, Tim was a skinny Chihuahua; all bark and no bite at all. Tim stood there holding Tetsu by the arm, and looking stunned. He stared at his cousin's limp body, lying unconscious on the ground.

Bruno swung his sock about Tim's neck. The young warrior moved behind Tim. Bruno grabbed both ends of the sock-rock and in one fluid motion jumped up into the air and brought his knees up into the man's back. Then he pulled back hard on his sock. Tim arched backward, releasing Tetsu and dropping to his knees.

The third man released Evelyn Rose and came at Bruno. His name was Lenny LenDiore, and he was a dirty fighter who relied on the element of surprise. He rarely attacked anyone from the front, always from behind. But Bruno was a born warrior. He held his victim down with one knee sensing the impending attack, and waiting for just the right moment to move.

Lenny lunged for toward Bruno, diving at his back, using his head like a battering ram. Lenny dove. Bruno sidestepped, twisting around so that as Lenny's head came down, Bruno's knee came up and into the face of his attacker.

Mosi moved in, screaming like a wild man. He swung his sock round and round, whirling it just inches from the man's head. Lenny was on his back now, his nose bleeding freely. He cowered against the concrete walkway, covering his face and pleading for Mosi to back off.

Bruno stepped forward. "If you know what's good for you, you'll stay away from my friends." Then he hit the man hard in the face. It was a tomahawking punch of granite knuckles that knocked him out cold.

Bruno grabbed Evelyn Rose and yelled to Mosi, "Get Tetsu."

They ran toward Fulton. Tommy Sanstrom was at the corner. He simply stood there with his eyes transfixed about five feet from his big toe. It was obvious to Bruno that Tommy had wanted to run, indeed needed to run, yet he had looped around the block and come back. But now he stood frozen in fear, just as Mosi had earlier. Bruno shook Tommy softly, "Tommy, look at me. We're all right! But we got to get out of here!"

Tears came to Tommy's eyes. "I'm sorry. I had to run." His eyes moved from the girls to Bruno. "I came back Bruno."

"It's okay, Tommy. I've been scared before too. But, we have to go now." Bruno didn't wait for an answer. He grabbed Tommy and pulled him after Mosi, who was leading the girls toward the Civic Plaza. They could cut through the plaza and take Polk to Eddy. Mosi peered back toward Hyde Street.

Tommy followed his gaze and let out a small scream. Naydas and Howard were walking up Hyde. They were heading right into the now semi-conscious men. "What could have taken them so long?"

Mosi said, "Naydas never moves fast."

Howard was leading the way, walking toward the three brutes, who were on their feet now. They looked confused and angry.

Bruno took one look and started running. He was a Navajo warrior again, running fast. He was trying to run quietly, but it was no use. The sound of his sneakers slapping against the pavement echoed within the dark street.

Marek looked into the darkness. At first his eyes locked on Howard and Naydas, but then moved to Bruno.

Marek shouted, "There he is." Marek ran toward Bruno. Lenny and Tim were close behind.

Howard let out a girly scream. He ran to the closest house and began pounding on the door. "HELP! HELP!" Whoever lived in the home turned off their lights and pretended not to hear Howard's screams.

Bruno called to him, but he kept pounding at the door, pleading for help. Naydas turned back toward Fulton. It was perhaps the first time that Naydas ever really ran. It looked unnatural. Bruno grabbed her arm and pulled her along.

"Bruno' is going to stay with Naydas. They'll catch him." Evelyn shot out of the darkness and onto Hyde Street. Her legs moved in long strides propelling her toward Naydas. As she approached Naydas she screamed at her, "Mosi's waiting for you at the corner!" She pointed back to the small form of Mosi, but kept running.

She grabbed Bruno, pulling him free from Naydas and back toward the three men. She shouted, "Don't worry, they'll follow us," then she shot up a small alley that led to the Civic Center Bart Station, pulling Bruno east and away from home.

Bruno Vic was stunned. It was a brave move, and it probably saved Naydas, but the three thugs were close. Bruno could almost feel their breath on his back. He raced to keep up with the swift form of Evelyn Rose.

Only fifteen yards separated them from the thugs. Evelyn ran like a gazelle. Bruno had to push hard just to keep up. As she came to the Bart Station, Evelyn kept running. She skirted around the terminal platform. There were a handful of people there, but they would probably be of little help. Evelyn shot onto Market Street, crossing the four lanes of traffic. Cars hit the brakes and swerved to avoid hitting them. She went east heading up Market for another block then turned south on Seventh Street. Bruno followed.

A Mercedes almost hit Marek as he crossed Market. He was losing ground. He called back to Lenny, "They're getting away. Shoot them."

"Not yet! We're on Market for Christ sake."

Lenny waited until he reached the corner of Seventh Street. The bright lights of the boulevard reached out to Lenny, revealing his movements in a soft yellow glow. He pulled his gun and pointed it down Seventh. He eyed the tip of the barrel, pointing it at Bruno's back. He was breathing hard, but they were getting away, so he took his shot. There was a loud popping sound and the bullet race from the gun.

Bruno heard the pop of the gun and felt a bullet rush past his left ear. Mission was just ahead. Minna Street was a long dead end that ran from Ninth Street to the Moscone Center West. Evelyn turned west, heading away from the Center and into the dark alley. She led Bruno into an area of dilapidated buildings. They looked as if they needed to be red tagged for demolition. The street had no lights. Debris covered the sidewalk. Tin cans, cardboard boxes, and even an old car with no tires cluttered the alleyway. Her foot caught on something and Evelyn stumbled to the ground. Her knee hit hard, yet she pushed herself to her feet and ran on. Bruno's breath was labored; deep and heavy. A second shot echoed through the buildings,

and this time Evelyn's legs locked with fear. She stumbled a second time. Bruno crashed into her.

Bruno managed to keep his feet moving. He picked Evelyn up as he ran, holding her in his arms, carrying her to a darkly shadowed section of the alley. Bruno wrapped his arms about Evelyn and rolled to the side of the building where the shadows were the thick.

They were hiding in the shadow of a broken down brick building. Above him a broken window offered a possible escape, but the thugs' footfalls were closing in. Bruno felt certain that the big man would hear him if he tried to move.

The footfalls slowed as Marek Savatski, Tim Conley and Lenny LenDiore approached. Bruno could hear their deep breathes as they sucked in the cold night air. They stopped less than ten feet from Bruno and Evelyn.

Music rang out, "I'm on the hell train now, all night long. Where the devil dance and I sing his song..." It was Marek's phone. He had chosen an evil song by Ozzie Osbourne as his ring tone. He held the phone in front of him. The light spilled out into the night and Bruno feared that they might see him. But Marek was focused upon the person calling him. It was Phillip Todd Balmy, leader of the skinheads.

Marek spoke through gasping breathes. "Phillip..." gasping breathes, "...I need your help..." gasp, "little punk..." gasp, "stole my new girlfriend..." gasp." Marek Savaski paused, and then said, "ran down..." gasping breathes, "Minna Street - the alley off of Seventh."

There was a moment of silence as the skinhead leader spoke to Marek, and then the big man hung up the phone. He smiled, placing his hands on his knees. "Phillip and the guys are on the way!"

Lenny laughed loudly. "It's just a matter of time now. We'll catch that punk." He looked at Marek. "I think he broke your nose." Lenny pointed at Tim. "And he damn near choked you to death. We'll get that little..."

Tim broke in. "Marek, my man, too bad Phillip didn't call a little earlier. We could have had both our new girlfriends."

Lenny gave him a hard shove. "Tim, you're an idiot. Why do you always have to start a sentence with 'Marek, my man'? You sound like a retard. Besides, I don't care about the impure; I just want that fine looking blonde!"

"Well, Len my man, I can't help it if I have a thing for..."

Lenny interrupted, pushing Tim again, a little harder this time. "See there you go, 'Len, my man'. I'm not your man. I don't even like you. Nobody likes you. They're just your friends because they're scared of Phillip Todd."

"That's enough. Phillip Todd is going to be here soon enough."

Evelyn hid in the shadows. She was less than ten feet from Lenny. I'm strawberry blonde, not blonde you dumb oaf!"

Bruno whispered in Evelyn's ear. "Stay put. I'm going to find a way out of here."

He started to move for the far corner of the building, but Tim Conley and Lenny LenDiore moved in the same direction.

"I like Asians. I can't help it. They're so small, so cute and..."

"Shut up! You're a skin. How can you think that way?"

Bruno hadn't moved more than a foot. He froze, trying to melt into the shadows. He felt Evelyn starting to move. He wanted to tell her to stop, that if she made even the slightest noise they would be discovered, but he didn't dare speak.

Then she was gone, somehow disappearing into the night. A moment later he felt a tug on his pant leg, and she called out to him.

"Bruno." Evelyn's silky voice called from behind the broken window. Somehow, Evelyn had gotten to safety. Now Bruno needed to move. Slowly, soundlessly, he rose to his knees and scooted backward, until he was directly under the broken window. He reared up upon his knee and reached his hands through the window, and onto the inside sill. The glass was broken all around him, but Bruno was less afraid of cutting himself than making any noise.

Evelyn was standing now helping Bruno pull himself through the window. There was a cracking sound as bits of glass broke beneath his weight, but Tim and Lenny were back at it, making just enough of a commotion to conceal Bruno's escape.

A car raced down Seventh, speeding past the long alleyway. It hit the brakes, screeching to a halt. The driver threw the car in reverse, backing up until he could pull into the tiny alley. Light spilled into the alleyway showing Marek's broken nose. His nose was twisted to the side, and he had dried blood crusted on his upper lip.

Phillip Todd Balmy stepped from the car. He was a short little man with a paunch that stuck out as if he were pregnant. He took one look at Marek's nose and slapped him hard across the face.

"You work for me because you're tough. Just look at you. Some Indian boy swinging a sock whooped you. That's right. I know what happened. I got a call from a friend who happened to be watching the whole thing. He said you looked like a damn fool out there. He said you deserved to get your butt kicked."

Phillip Todd reached up and grabbed Marek by the ear. He pulled him to over to the building and pushed his face into the concrete wall. "They're in there aren't they?"

"I think so."

"Well, then lets go get them."

Phillip Todd's skinheads closed in on the building. Tim and Lenny stuck together. They walked around the alley in search of a doorway. Three more skinheads followed.

Bruno wanted to move to the back of the building, but some sixth sense told him that there was no time. He pulled Evelyn close, hiding just beneath the window. Only a concrete wall separated the skinheads from their prey. Still, Bruno couldn't help but notice the sent of Evelyn's silky hair. It was a mixture of strawberries and wildflowers. Bruno decided right then that he would ask Evelyn to be his girlfriend. If he could survive one more life threatening experience, one more time when the city of San Francisco tried to take him as it had taken his father; he would ask Evelyn Rose out on a date. Perhaps they could go see a movie. They could eat popcorn, drink soda, and hold hands. Bruno smiled at the thought.

But then a new odor filled his nostrils. It was a heavy odor, powerful enough to push away Evelyn's wondrous fragrance. It wafted in like a heavy fog, and when Bruno looked up he saw the oily, black barrel of a madman 357. The gun eased its way through the broken window. Phillip Todd Balmy was only inches away.

Just then Tim Conley came running back. He peered into the window and asked, "PT my cuz, you find 'em?"

"You know I hate that name. My name is Phillip Todd, not PT. And the way you say it ñ I just want to shoot your tongue off."

"Sorry cuz, I just want that girl. She's so fine. She's like..."

"Shut up, Tim! They're in here."

Phillip Todd let loose his pistol, showering shots into the darkened room. The explosion of bullets sounded much louder than Bruno would have imagined. Phillip Todd rested his forearms upon the windowsill, leaning into the darkness, watching for movement. Broken glass crackled under his weight, and his pistol hung down into the room.

Evelyn tightened her grip on Bruno, burying her head farther into his chest. He could feel her fear, her need to escape. The gun was dipped down pointing right at Evelyn. She was breathing heavy now, and her entire body began to vibrate in uncontrollable shaking. Bruno knew panic was setting in. He knew that Evelyn was about to stand up and run for her life.

"Stay with me Evelyn. Stay with me, and I'll protect you."

Evelyn pushed her head deeper into his chest, pulling him tight and breathing in short quiet breathes.

Tim Conley leaned in, sharing the window with his cousin. "PT, my cuz."

Tim was bolder than most when it came to the head skinhead. He could afford to be; Phillip Todd was his cousin. If Phillip Todd got mad at anyone else, the guy was as good as dead, but not Tim. The worst thing that ever happened was a beating, but that was par-for-the-course in the life of a skinhead.

"Dang cuz - you stink! Don't you think it's time for a bath?"

Phillip Todd lashed out with his free hand, striking Tim like some diamondback rattle snake. He struck so hard, so fast that Tim didn't even know what hit him. Then Phillip Todd dropped his gun and went for Tim's neck, his fingers clamping down like the jaws of his favorite snake. He shook him and Tim's head rattled back and forth.

The rest of the skinheads laughed loudly at the sight. It looked rather funny, a short and pudgy man throwing the taller one around. Lenny LenDiore was right when he said nobody liked Tim. None did. In a final burst of fury Phillip Todd threw his cousin through the window and into the dark room.

Phillip Todd's gun was lying on the floor only inches from Bruno's foot. Evelyn stopped shaking. Her body went rigid, and she stopped breathing. Fear had completely taken over. Evelyn started to sit upright. Bruno realized what she was doing, but it was too late to stop her. An instant later Evelyn was sitting in plain sight for all to see.

Phillip Todd yelled, "Find them. I know they're..."

He saw Evelyn Rose. She was enchanting. Phillip Todd fumbled for a moment, looking for his lost his gun. That's when Bruno made his move.

Bruno jumped to his feet. His fist swung into the skinhead leader's face. SMACK! Phillip Todd Balmy was thrown back, out of the window, landing on the sidewalk. Bruno moved toward Tim Conley. Tim was getting to his knees, but he was no match for Bruno Vic. Bruno brought his knee up and into Tim's face, sending him flying backward across the room.

Lunging back towards the window where Phillip Todd dropped his gun, Bruno searched frantically. He needed to find the cold hard steel that would save him and Evelyn. His hands moved across the dark floor, but he could not locate the gun. Outside the window Marek Savatski helped his leader to his feet. The skinheads swarmed, rushing to the broken window.

Bruno was about to give up, grab Evelyn and run for the far side of the room when his hand ran across something cold. It was the 357 Magnum. His fingers wrapped around the handle of the gun. Bruno stood upright, pointing the gun at the window. He knew he could not kill anyone. That would be a blemish on his soul, a disgrace to the memory of his father. But he sure as hell could put the fear-of-God in them.

He let loose a shower of bullets hitting the wall around the window. The noise of the gun echoed through the alley and the skinheads scattered. Bruno tossed the gun aside and reached down to Evelyn. She was up in an instant and ready to run. They headed for the back of the room. Bruno ran through an open door, and then pushed Evelyn ahead of him. They ran down a long hallway to another door.

Evelyn wasted no time. She swung the door open and ran inside, entering a stairwell and dashing up the stairs. They ran up three flights of stairs, threw open another door and ran down a long hallway to the corner room. They hurried inside closing the door behind them.

The room was empty save for a few rocks lying on the floor. There was nowhere to hide, and their only chance of escape was a solitary window. Evelyn whispered, "Fire escape."

They moved to the window. It was shattered like all the others in this building. Bruno looked back at the rocks on the floor. Young kids from the neighborhood love to throw rocks at abandoned buildings. If he had to, he could use those rocks to defend Evelyn. Yet, even as the thought crossed his mind he knew it was hopeless. The skinheads had guns, and this time Bruno would not have the element of surprise. Escape was their only hope.

Outside the window was a straight shot down, no fire escape, no drain pipe, nothing. They were trapped. Evelyn looked up at Bruno Vic, a look of desperation washed over her face. Her green eyes pooled with salty tears that spilled over her lower lid and down her cheek. They had come so far, but could run no further.

Bruno stared into Evelyn's eyes and sadness enveloped him. He wanted to tell her that everything would be all right, but he could not lie. For as long as Bruno could remember, his life's purpose was protecting people. Perhaps it was the loss of his father, that drove Bruno to keep those close to his heart safe from danger.

Evelyn placed a hand on Bruno's cheek. She moved closer. He could feel her warm breath on his face and knew that she was about to kiss him. She was so beautiful, so delicate and lovely that Bruno found it difficult to concentrate on escape. He wanted to hold her, to kiss her and tell her that she was his one and only. But the need for survival prevailed. He had to find a means of escape.

A small movement caught his eye. Just outside the window was a telephone wire. It hung loosely, bouncing ever so slightly in the night breeze. The wire stretched from their building over another long dead end street that ran parallel to Minna to a building across way. It was dark back here, even darker than in the front where the skinheads had parked. When Bruno had first looked out the window he had paid it no attention. It was an old telephone wire that offered no hope of escape. But now Bruno saw the wire in a different light. It was indeed their only chance. Bruno pulled away from Evelyn's touch. He moved to the window.

"This isn't going to be easy, but we're getting out of here!"

"Nothing in my life is easy anymore. I just thought I might want to get my first kiss before I die." She looked back at the door.

Footsteps echoed from the stairwell. The skinheads were on their trail.

Bruno pulled Evelyn to the window. He stood up on the sill, pulled off his shirt, and swung it up around the telephone wire. He reached out his hand and silently motioned for Evelyn to take hold of the two ends.

Evelyn smiled, "Clever Bruno." She climbed through the window and grabbed Bruno's shirt.

The wire sagged under her weight, but it held. It was hanging low now, so Bruno could reach it without the aid of his shirt. He wrapped his fingers around the thin wire, lifting his legs up and off the sill. Using his feet, he pushed Evelyn out and into the open air. The shirt slid away from the building carrying Evelyn toward safety. He walked his hands two steps further along the wire. It was much harder than he had imagined. The thin wire burned into his fingers, sagging toward the center of the two building, and causing Bruno to slide. He lifted his legs again, kicking Evelyn further out.

The wire seemed to stretch slightly, sagging low, and Evelyn slid to its center. Bruno raced after her, each grip sliding further along the wire. His plan had worked so far, but now came the

hard part. He would have to push Evelyn uphill, so to speak, to the other building, and then hope that there was a window close enough for them to enter.

Bruno lifted his legs. He gave Evelyn another kicking shove, but the shirt only moved half a foot, and then Evelyn came sliding back down the wire. Bruno tried again, kicking harder this time. But Evelyn kept sliding back. On the third try Evelyn helped. She kick her feet forward toward the opposite building in hopes that the shirt to slide a little farther. The wire snapped pulling free from the building; Evelyn and Bruno sailed through the air.

The telephone wire ripped from the wall behind them sending Bruno and Evelyn flying toward the far building. There was an instant of weightlessness, then falling. Bruno clung to his wire and Evelyn to the shirt. They were twisting and spinning. The wind whistled past. They sailed toward the hard concrete wall. All was black, spinning blackness. Thud. Evelyn's head hit the wall. Bruno was still spinning when he hit. His back crashed into the bricks knocking the wind out of him. Evelyn's body went limp. The shirt slid freely down the wire and into Bruno. The weight of Evelyn pulled Bruno's hand free; sending them both into a silent plummet toward the alley below.

Bruno landed hard, Evelyn landing right on top of him. Her body was limp and unconscious. Bruno's eyes moved to the window.

He heard the door crash open. Phillip Todd Balmy was screaming. "Where are they? That little Indian made a fool of you Marek. We gotta find 'em. Find 'em and kill 'em."

Bruno Vic moved slowly. He was lying on his back holding Evelyn. When her head hit the wall, she had lost consciousness, but she was awake now. She was mumbling something that Bruno could not quite make out.

He put his finger to her lips. He could hear the skinheads moving about in the empty room above. His plan hadn't worked exactly as he had hoped, but at least they were safe. He needed to get Evelyn to a hospital. She probably had a concussion, so a doctor should take a look at her. Bruno stood. He picked Evelyn up and carried her. Being careful to stay hidden within the shadows, he moved down the alleyway toward Eighth Street.

Bruno headed south, deeper into the Blood's territory. He hoped the skins wouldn't follow. Evelyn tapped him on the shoulder.

"This is very romantic Bruno, but I can walk."

"Maybe I like carrying you." The comment was made in jest, but Bruno couldn't help feeling surge of emotion flowing from her body to his. The more he was around her, the more adored her. He set her on her feet and the two made their way down the alley. They were holding hands now. Bruno felt certain that one of the skinheads would be waiting back here, but no one stopped them. They headed west until they came to Julia where they turned south, away from Minna Alley and the Skins. They would hike through the Blood's territory and then up Stanyan to Saint Mary's Medical Center. It was a long hike, but one that would keep safe.

Bruno was keeping a brisk pace. Evelyn pulled at his arm. "I need to stop. My head is killing me. Every time my heart beats it feels like thunder in my head."

The thump, thump, thumping sound of heavy metal music echoed in the distance. The skinheads were back in their car searching the streets.

Bruno looked over his shoulder. "I know a place where you can rest. It's not far from here. But I need to get you to a doctor."

"You sound like my mother."

"Funny. It's just - I thought... if you're going to be my girlfriend, I might like you to have a brain that actually works."

"Oh, are you claiming me as your girlfriend? Do I have any say in this, or do you grab any girl you think is pretty down here in the Tenderloin?"

"Yeah, we pretty much do. I suppose up in the Spoon they carry your books and all that sissy stuff. Here in the Tenderloin, we just grab 'em by the hair and drag 'em to and from school."

Evelyn laughed, socking Bruno in the chest. "Owe. That hurt my head."

"That'll teach ya. Never hit your boyfriend."

"Are you asking me to be your girlfriend?"

"Well, only if you're going to say yes."

"Yes." Evelyn grabbed Bruno's hand and together they hurried down Tehama Street.

Bruno stopped at an abandoned junkyard.

"Years ago an old black man owned this junk yard. He sold automobile parts. My dad said he was a good man, but he's been dead for years.

"Looks more like decades."

The junkyard was wild. The fences were broken and falling down in many places and ivy was pushing its way through what was left of the fence. Some of the plants that grew here had white, orange, and purple flowers. It was a truly bizarre sight to see, pile after pile of metal heaped into a cluster of debris with all these colorful flowers pushing their way through any and every possible opening; all this in the middle of the concrete roads and building of San Francisco.

Bruno worked his way through the maze of vehicles, and finally coming up to a 1971 Cadillac. "How's this?"

The car had obviously been in an accident. The front end was crunched so that the dashboard was sitting on the front seat. Bruno opened the rear door and motioned for Evelyn to step inside. "Your chariot awaits, my lady."

"It's perfect." Evelyn stepped inside the vehicle. It was roomy and she immediately stretched out on the back seat. "Good lord, my head hurts. What happened out there? The last thing I remember is trying to kiss you. Did we? Kiss, I mean.

Bruno laughed. "No."

"Good. I'd hate to get knocked out by my first kiss."

Bruno felt his face turned warm with embarrassment. He changed the subject. "Don't you remember the telephone wire? It was so cool. We flew across the alley. The wind was whipping passed..., and then bam! We hit the wall. That actually wasn't so cool.

"You mean... Wow. I thought I was dreaming."

"It was a pretty spectacular escape if I must say so myself." Bruno smiled. His romantic embarrassment was gone. He had protected Evelyn, kept her safe in a situation that looked to have no way out. "I need to get you to the hospital. But, I want to make sure the skins are gone. Maybe we should wait until morning." He paused looking out the rear window. "I'll wake you up every hour. You could have a concussion. It's dangerous to sleep too long."

Evelyn stretched out on the back seat. Bruno got as comfortable as he could on the floor beside her. She reached out and gripped his hand in a tender, girlfriend sort of way. It felt good, comforting.

CHAPTER 10

A light rapping sound on the window above woke Bruno. Sunlight streamed in through the Cadillac's rear passenger window. Bruno wondered what time it was. Had he slept so long that it was morning already? No, it was not the sunlight shining through the window but a flashlight. It was still pitch black outside.

Lawrence Charles Crisp opened the car door. It creaked in protest. "Now what do you suppose a couple of young crackers like you are doing in my grand pappy's junkyard? You want to buy one of these vehicles? I don't believe either of you have your driver's license." Lawrence turned to look at someone behind him. "Terence, do you think these two are old enough to drive?"

Terence stuck his head into the Cadillac. He wore a loose fitting T-shirt with no sleeves and when he reached forward his bicep flexed, looking as if it might rip through his dark skin. A thick vein pushed up along the peak of his muscle. His voice was low and sounded as if he had a teaspoon of gravel caught in the back of his throat. "No sir. I don't believe they're old enough to drive."

Terence looked surprised. "Do you know who we got here, Lawrence? I believe we got young Mr. Vizcarra."

Lawrence reached into the car. He grabbed Bruno's shirt. "I've heard a lot about the Vizcarra. Come on out here. Let me take a look at you."

Bruno stepped out of the car. Lawrence looked him up and down. "So this is Bruno Vic. I thought you were supposed to be as big as a mountain." Lawrence looked at Terence and smiled. His gaze returned to Bruno. "Pleased to meet you all the same." Lawrence reached out his hand and shook Bruno's.

Evelyn stepped out of the Cadillac. She looked up at Terence. He was smiling down at her as if she were some cute little puppy.

"This is my friend Evelyn. She is new at my school. We were meeting with a guy named Red. You might know him. He's a big guy - long red ponytail, and one dead eye. Anyway, we just left his house when the skinheads jumped us. Evelyn hit her head. I think she has a concussion. We need to get to the hospital."

"I hate those little cry babies! Don't you hate 'em Terence?"

"I hates 'em sir."

"We'll take you to the hospital."

Lawrence had a black limo with tinted windows and a dark visor that separated the front seat from the back. Evelyn and Bruno climbed into the back. Lawrence followed. Terence climbed in the front and lowered the visor. Lawrence sank into the soft cushions. "To the hospital Terence."

Lawrence sat across from Bruno. He looked curious. "Why in the world would you want to hook up with Red? He's as crazy as the day is long." His eyes drifted to Evelyn then back to Bruno. "You know what I don't get; what really drives me crazy? Why would a promising black girl like Naydas Rascondas want to join up with Red? I mean, Naydas is one of my own. She'd be welcome in my gang."

"No offense, Lawrence, but everyone knows that your gang sells drugs. I won't have anything to do with drugs, and neither will Naydas."

"You think just because I'm black I do drugs?" Lawrence leaned forward. "I do offer my protection to some of my brothers who partake in drugs. And they do pay me for that protection. But I don't do drugs."

"Sounds to me like you're splitting hairs. Those brothers of yours are coming to my school and selling drugs to kids. When I see sixth-graders buying drugs from one of your so-called 'brothers' it gets me mad. And, whether you do drugs or not doesn't really matter. You're guilty of selling to kids."

Evelyn sank deep into her seat. She pulled Bruno close. "You shouldn't talk to him like that. Tetsu told me all about him. He's the one who beat all those skinheads. He's the leader of the Bloods."

Lawrence Charles Crisp started to laugh. "Yes young lady, I lead the Bloods." His eyes were hard, unyielding and cruel. Yet there was something else there, perhaps a strange sort of respect. "Vizcarra, I don't know why, but I like you. I'm going to give you a little advice about your new buddy Red. Don't turn your back on him. You'd safer with my Bloods than with that crazy fool."

The limo pulled into the circular drive in front of Saint Mary's Hospital. Bruno helped Evelyn out of the car. He looked at Lawrence.

"You know Naydas always said that you were a good man, a hero to all the blacks around here. From some of the stories I've heard about you, I think she's right. I just you weren't involved with the drugs. Even though Naydas never mentions it, I know it bothers her."

"Damn Terence, is this boy something or what? He's got guts, I'll give him that."

"Yes sir, boy done sat right here in your back seat and called you a drug dealer. He don't hold nothing back - do he sir?"

"No he don't." Lawrence looked into Bruno's eyes, but talk to Terence as if he had already gone. "Still... I like that Bruno Vic. I guess the rumors about him are true. Lets roll Terence."

Terence closed the limo door. He smiled as he climbed back into the driver's seat and slowly pulled out of the driveway. Bruno watched as the car faded into the darkness of the city. He turned to Evelyn grabbing her hand and squeezing it tightly. They walked as boyfriend and girlfriend into the hospital.

CHAPTER 11

Marvin Molehense stood at the entrance of the emergency room. His police dog, Jake, by his side. The dog gave a deep sounding bark and Marvin looked up to see Bruno Viczarra. It had been years since Marvin had seen Bruno. The past came crashing down like a giant wave of sorrow.

His mind carried Marvin back; back to that fateful day when he lost his partner. Marvin and Iron Eyes Vizcarra were driving down Mission when a riot broke out. As usual, Iron Eyes was fearless. He insisted that Jake wait in the car. Even now Marvin wondered if things might have ended differently. He wondered if the dog might have changed their fate. As they walked toward the crowd a sense of hatred filled the air. There was an electric buzz, almost as if the crowd had a need, a lust for killing. The crowd of people seemed to feed off of one another's hatred.

Someone screamed, "Get out of here, pig!"

A skinny man wearing blue jeans and a tank top rushed in on Iron Eyes. He came at him from behind. That single movement ignited a frenzied action. The crowd attacked. Marvin stood beside Iron Eyes. At first it seemed that no one could take Iron Eyes down. The skinny man hit the giant form of Iron Eyes, yet he remained unfazed. Then more and more of the rioters rushed in, pushing the skinny man into Iron Eyes. He stumbled backward. Marvin knew his partner was about to be over taken. He wanted to help, but it was hopeless. He looked back at the squad car. Jake was locked inside. He was barking, slamming his head into the window, needing to help his master, but it was no use.

Every cop knows the dangers of his job. They also know you never leave your partner. Yet that is exactly what Marvin Molehense did.

Marvin fled. He ran around the corner. A pile of debris was lying beside one of the buildings, so Marvin quickly buried himself under it. It was a move that saved his life, a decision that would plague him for the rest of his life. Sounds of gunshots and screams of anger filled the air. Marvin knew it was the end of Iron Eyes.

The skinny man, Phillip Todd Balmy, was taken to the hospital. He had a broken leg and two cracked ribs. Marek Savatski was there, too. A month later Marek was busted for attempting to rob a liquor store, and spent the next two and a half years in Henshaw Maximum Security State Penitentiary.

It was some time before Marvin was able to walk the beat again. But return he did, along with his faithful dog Jake.

"Bruno," Marvin's voice squeaked in a mousey sort of way. "Can I talk to you for a moment?"

Bruno couldn't even look at this mole of a man. He didn't deserve eye contact. He was the reason Bruno grew up fatherless; the reason his mother turned to alcohol.

"Why don't you crawl back under that garbage heap of yours."

Jake gave a low growl at the venomous words.

Bruno kept walking. He pulled Evelyn past the cop and up to the receptionist's desk. He thought about the last time he was at this hospital. He was small then, just a boy. He had always felt safe and protected by his father. But that night was different. That night he watched his father die.

Bruno thought about his father's dying request. The words were painful, a request that Bruno was still not ready to fulfill. Yet, a request that one-day he must. He looked back at Marvin Molehence. I'm not ready to forgive him, not yet.

The receptionist said they could not admit Evelyn without the consent of her mother, so she let Evelyn use a phone. Mrs. Thompson rushed down to the hospital and Evelyn was admitted. Mrs. Thompson looked haggard. She had lines of worry and kept saying, "Are you okay, baby? I was so worried about you."

Evelyn told her mother an abbreviated version of what had happened. She did not tell her about Johnny Skolnick or the meeting at Red's.

The attending physician confirmed that Evelyn had a concussion. He prescribed Advil and plenty of rest. He told her mother to wake her every two hours. Then he turned walking out of the small examination room and on to his next patient.

Mrs. Thompson seemed more relaxed once she was in the car. She was driving up Hayes when she broke the silence. "Evelyn, I don't ever want you going out after dark. This is not the Silver Spoon. You could get yourself killed." She took a deep breath letting the air out through pursed lips. "It's a good thing we moved next to a hero. You know even my boss has heard of Bruno Vic Vizcarra. I think every one in the Tenderloin knows you Bruno."

"It's because of my dad. He was a great cop."

"Well, you're pretty terrific too. Thank you for watching after Evelyn."

"You're welcome Mrs. Thompson." Bruno smiled at Evelyn. He could feel the bond that connected them igniting within his chest. It was a powerful connection that warmed his entire body.

CHAPTER 12

Evelyn woke with the ringing of the doorbell. She was lying on the couch with a light blanket covering her. She looked over at her alarm clock. It was set to go off every two hours. A tall glass of water and a bottle Advil were on the table beside her. She started to get up and found her mother's note lying upon her chest. She read.

Princess –

I'm so sorry about what happened last night. I'm sorry I haven't been much of a mother lately. It's only my second day on the job at Action Trucking, so I must go. I'll be home at eight.

Love you,

Mom

The doorbell rang again. Evelyn went to the door. She opened it slowly. Red stood on her doorstep. He walked inside, and looked about the living room. "Looks like you dropped something last night." He held up the brown paper bag. Evelyn knew the helmet and the computer disc were inside.

"I thought you were supposed to protect us!" Evelyn Rose spoke as if she were scolding a small child.

Red smiled in his reptilian manner. "I like you Evelyn. You know, anyone else talks to me like that, they're dead. But I like you.

I heard about last night. I'm sorry I wasn't there. I can't be everywhere at once, damn it. But, when I find out who done it - well believe me, they won't dare fool with any of you again."

"We already know who they were. It was the skinheads."

"Good. I'll have to go have a talk with their leader. Take this. Where's your mom, at work?"

"No," Evelyn lied. She was in no hurry to play that stupid game. She doesn't work again until Monday night."

"Monday night then. Don't lose this again. Next time Naydas might not be there to save you." Red walked out the door and got in his car. He headed down Eddy Street to Van Ness Avenue and turned south.

Evelyn closed the door and stared at the brown paper bag thinking about the game. She dreaded the thought of playing it. Something about the whole idea of sticking that dark helmet on her head and hooking it up to a computer gave her the heebie-jeebies.

It was eleven o'clock in the morning and Naydas was finally ready to get up. Red had woken her an hour ago; far too early as far as Naydas was concerned. He wanted the helmet that Evelyn dropped. Naydas had phoned Red late last night. She told him about the attack, and that she had been able to save Evelyn's helmet. She knew Red would be pleased at the fact that she had both helmets. And she was right. Red showed up at her door at 10:00, asking for Evelyn's helmet, and telling Naydas to get over to her mother's work and try out the game.

Naydas loved weekends; it meant she got to sleep in. But, now she was hungry. She thought she might treat herself to a banana split, after all bananas are quite healthy and after last night's excitement, she deserved a little ice cream. Her bare feet thumped across the warm

carpet as she made her way to bedroom door. She opened it and gave a yelp of fright. Red was standing in the hallway his arms crossed and his milky eye searching blindly for her. At first she was frightened, but then she saw Red's smile.

"Good morning Naydas! Red lost his smile. "Aren't you supposed to be at work with your mother? Shouldn't you be playing The Hunt by now?"

"How did you get in here? The door was lock."

Red just laughed.

"I plan on playing The Hunt, it's just that my mind doesn't really work until around noon. Beside, my mom will be at Giovannetti's all day. There's plenty of time. I'll play your game right after breakfast."

Red's body tightened, his milky eye began to water, and it was clear that he was holding back that terrible rage of his. But Naydas had grown up in the Tenderloin District. She was used to people who could not control their temper. She walked past Red and into the kitchen where she began preparing her beloved banana split.

"As soon as you're done with your little treat then. You understand?"

Naydas nodded, "Yeah, yeah Red. Don't get your undies in a bind. I'll play your game today - as soon as I'm done with my breakfast."

Red seemed to be satisfied. He left Naydas in the kitchen, closing the door behind him as he walked out of her little apartment.

It was four o'clock in the afternoon and Naydas still felt sick. After Red left she stretched out on the couch and ate her banana split. It was so good she had decided to have another. But not even the second one could satisfy her hunger. Halfway through her third banana split she pushed the bowl off her belly and laid her head back against the couch. That was two and a half hours ago. She rolled herself off the couch.

She knew she had to get moving. Her mother was a cleaning lady for Mr. Giovannetti. She worked every Saturday at Giovannetti Bail Bonds from ten in the morning until six at night. Naydas grabbed the grocery bag, which held The Hunt and headed off to her mother's work.

Mrs. Rascondas seemed happy to see her daughter. A wide smile stretched across her face when Naydas told her that she needed to use Mr. Giovannetti's computer to do some schoolwork. She looked up at her daughter, who'd been taller than her ever since the fourth grade and smiled. "Oh, my sweet little Naydas; you're learning so much in school. You're going to grow up to be somebody all right. Not just a cleaning lady who has to pick up after everyone else. You'll get to be the one making the mess, like Mr. Giovannetti and his secretary."

"Thanks mom."

Mrs. Rascondas didn't know much about computers, but she had watched Mr. Giovannetti log in when she was sweeping behind his desk. Naydas booted up his computer and Mrs. Rascondas typed in the letters S W I N D L E. The computer came to life and Mrs. Rascondas watched for a moment as her daughter pulled some sophisticated looking equipment out of a brown grocery bag. Naydas prepared to enter The Hunt while her mother went back to her cleaning.

Red arrived at Norman Fitzwald's at eleven-thirty. He figured it would take Naydas about a half an hour to eat her banana split, and another half an hour to get to her mother's work. He wanted to be at Norman's early, just in case there were any goof-ups. When he arrived Norman was having a quiet brunch on his tiny, back balcony with Betty. Red was tempted have a little fun with Norman. He wanted to invite himself to their brunch and then begin to flirt with Betty. He knew that this would send Norman into a tizzy. But now was not the time. He needed to

steal the money first. Besides, right now he needed Norman. Soon he would have his money. Then he would take care of Norman.

By 4:15 Red was beside himself. He couldn't stop pacing back and forth behind Norman who was logged onto the Internet and waiting. They were waiting for The Hunt to connect Giovannetti Bail Bond's computer to Norman's.

Red kept saying, "Where is that damn girl?" And, "Why hasn't she logged on yet?" And then, "Damn her." Finally Red said, "We should have given the game to Mosi and be done with it."

Norman was scared. His breath came out in choppy little gasps. He seemed to be having a private conversation within his own mind. The little computer nerd tilted his tangled black head of hair to the left and whispered, "I love you too, Betty!"

"Betty's still here? That does it. I'm telling Barney." Red yelled. "Barney, your wife is here! She's with Norman. Norman says he loves her. Isn't that romantic?"

"I've already told you, Red. She only plays his wife for the cartoon. They're not really married." Norman was actually yelling at Red.

Red didn't like anyone yelling at him, especially this weasel. He leaned his face close to Norman Fitzwald's, letting his milky eye stare blankly into Norman's. "Do you really want to yell at me? I don't want hurt you Norman. I need you. You're my friend. But Betty? Now - I really don't care about Betty. As far as I'm concerned, she belongs back in her little cartoon with Barney. And, I know just how to put her back there. Do you really want to yell at me? Because I'm telling you, you yell at me again, and I'm sending her back. You won't ever see her again."

Norman Fitzwald became utterly silent. He seemed to be lost within some dark world of his own. Red wondered if he had just sent him over the edge. He hoped not. He still needed Norman.

Thirty minutes passed before Norman looked up and said, "Red, when did you get here?"

Red grinned. "I just walked in a minute ago. What have you been up to?"

Norman started to answer but just then his computer called out to him. "The hunt is on!"

Red looked over at the computer screen. A knight, dressed in shining armor was yelling, "The hunt is on! The hunt is on!"

The knight was sitting upon a powerful stallion with long white tufts of fur at its ankles. His steed reared up, kicking its forepaws as a vicious dragon flew into view. The dragon was a brilliant color of red. It had iron-tough scales that shimmered in the sunlight. The beast landed. He eyed his prey with a devilish hunger. Long claws dug into the earth as it circled the knight and his steed. The knight drew his sword, readying himself for the imminent attack. The dragon crouched low; spitting a torrent of fire. Lifting his shield, the knight was instantly engulfed in flames. His stallion stutter-stepped, turned, and galloped over a small ravine. The knight pulled back on the reins and the stallion spun around. Knight and horse looked to the sky, waiting for the dragon to attack.

The knight called out again, "The hunt is on! The hunt is on!"

Norman looked at Red. "Well, it looks like your little ganger has logged onto The Hunt. This is a loop ñ a small clip - it will run over and over until The Hunt has broken the codes."

"Then what?"

"Then we steal as much money as you want."

The room went uncomfortably quiet. No one spoke another word. Red sat by Norman's side waiting for him to perform his computer genius.

Naydas booted up Mr. Giovannetti's computer. She dropped herself heavily into his chair. She could still feel that last banana split. She loaded The Hunt's program into the disc drive, pulled the helmet over her head and strapped it tightly under her chin.

The visor blocked out light, and at first all she saw was blackness. She could hear the computer whirling as it read the information on the disc. Then pain. Naydas felt the pinprick of needles all over her head. The helmet seemed to come alive, sending thousands of tiny projectiles into her skull. The needles stimulated nerve endings with pinpricking sensations. Naydas jerked, and then went rigid. Her eyes opened as images began to flow before her.

Naydas was standing all-alone. She was in an ancient castle. Antique rugs hung from high wall of stone. The rugs had the design of a knight battling a dragon. She was in a large room with a grand bed and furniture carved from a rich dark wood. She walked over to the bed, just to touch it. Could this be real? How had she gotten here? Where did she come from? Naydas could not remember. She had never felt so light on her feet. She walked over to a full-sized mirror and peered in at herself. She was thin. She must have lost two hundred pounds. Her skin was soft with a gleaming black richness. Her face was so thin that Naydas could actually see her cheek bones.

False memories rushed in and she remembered. This was her room, her castle. Yes, she was the eldest of three princesses. She would be the one to become queen. Naydas was overjoyed. She wanted everyone to see how thin she was. She burst out of her door, heading to the main courtyard. But in her excitement, she ran into a small boy. In her typical style, Naydas pushed him against the castle wall. She looked down the hallway to make sure that no one would see her. Then she said, "Listen boy, one day I will be queen. How do you think it would feel to be beheaded?" Naydas smiled. She loved pushing her weight around, especially when it was the weight of royalty.

The boy simply smiled. He did not seem scared. On the contrary, he looked pleased. His face turned a deep red. He began to grow. In an instant, he was a foot taller than Naydas. Now he was looking down at her. He had a familiar grin. Somehow Naydas knew that grin, but she had no idea where she had seen it before.

"You don't remember me, do you?" The boy laughed. He pushed Naydas against the opposite wall. His voice had an edge. He did not sound like a boy at all, and indeed he was not, for he began to change before Naydas's eyes. First his jaws pushed forward with fangs growing down from the roof of his mouth. His forehead stretched back, and long pointed ears pushed up through the top of his head. His nostrils flattened so that his face began to look like that of a horse - no - it was not a horse's face; it was the head of a dragon. Smoke spiraled out of his nostrils as a pair of leather wings pushed out of his back. Now the dragon was growing fast. Soon it would be as tall as the ceiling. Naydas wrenched herself free from the beast's grip and ran down the hall screaming for someone, anyone to help. But the castle was empty. There was no one here to save her.

The beast called out from behind her, "Let the hunt begin!" He took off flying after Naydas, his wings hitting the ceiling and walls each time he beat them. Then he spit out a burst of flames.

Naydas felt fire licking at her back. It felt as if her skin was bubbling up, boiling like water. She screamed in pain, but kept on running. She turned a corner and the hallway ended abruptly. Why would anyone build a hallway that dead-ended in a stonewall?

Naydas started to panic. She was breathing hard now. She could hear the dragon racing toward her and knew her life would soon be over. She looked at the wall of stone once again, hoping that by some miracle there may be a doorway or something that she had missed.

Instead, a sword appeared. Next to the sword was a shining shield. She had never used a sword before, but it was her only chance.

Naydas grabbed the shield and slipped her hand through the leather straps. She pulled the sword from its sheath and turned to face the oncoming dragon. The beast clawed at the stone floor as it slid around the corner. Its wings were beating hard, pulling it through the air toward her. Naydas held the shield up as a burst of fire shot forth from the beast's giant maw. Fire sparkled all about her.

The dragon was close now, and the fire was dying. Naydas let the shield drop to her side, and she stepped forward swinging her sword. She could see the dragon's neck. The scales looked softer there, and she somehow knew this was where she needed to strike.

But, the beast was too quick. Its front talon moved in a blur, catching the sword. Its other talon shot forth gripping her shield. Naydas stood helpless before the Dragon. It lowered its toothy mouth until it was only inches from her face. The dragon smelled her. Naydas could feel his hot breath. The stench of death enveloped her. She knew her life was over. Naydas screamed. But to her surprise, the dragon tossed her down the hallway. The beast turned so that his spiked tail slapped against the wall.

"Try again. Try to escape me." He sent out a burst of flames.

Naydas ran. She ran as fast as her thin legs could move. Her heart was beating so hard she could feel it pounding throughout her entire chest. She ran down one corridor after another. The castle was empty. No one could help her. The dragon chased with his burning flames. Finally, Naydas could run no further. Exhausted she stopped. The sword and shield hung limply to the ground. She turned to face the beast.

The dragon towered over her. He was on all fours crawling towards his victim. The red beast sucked in a great breath of air and sent out a burst of flames that raced towards Naydas. Hot pain gripped Naydas refusing to let her go. She screamed out for mercy.

"I don't want to die." Naydas's scream echoed through the empty building. Mrs. Rascondas had been cleaning the men's bathroom. She ran to find Naydas strapped to some bizarre helmet. Naydas's arms were thrashing out at the air before her.

Mrs. Rascondas hugged her daughter. She unhooked the helmet. The needles retracted. She whispered in Naydas's ear, "It's okay, baby. Mama's got you now."

Naydas slid out of the chair and onto the cool floor. Her mother held her there, rocking her gently. Finally, Naydas opened her eyes.

Mrs. Rascondas wanted to take her home right away, but Naydas refused to leave until she had ejected the disc and gathered up the helmet. The last thing Naydas wanted was to upset Red. Once the game and its helmet were safely stowed within her brown paper bag Naydas and her mother headed for home.

Red kept pacing back and forth. "Okay. I'm done with this damned dragon and his little knight. Why can't they do anything else?" Red had been watching the video loop of the dragon attacking, the horse rearing up, the knight retreating, and then the dragon attacking again for a half an hour. He was getting bored and wanted to see some action.

"Trust me. Your little friend is seeing something completely different. I bet she's having the time of her life. You know, this game I've created is so great. It reads your mind as you play it, so everyone will play a slightly different game. That's cool. Don't you think?"

Norman jumped to his feet, sending his chair flying back into Red. "We're through. I can't believe it was that easy."

Red thought, easy? They had been on the computer for over thirty minutes. This was just some stupid bail bond company. He wondered how long it would take to break into a high-tech company like Wasserman International. "So, what's happening?"

"Well, you see the Dragon? Your little friend is battling that guy. As she fights with the dragon the game is hacking into Mr. Giovannetti's computer. The program searches all the keystrokes ever made. After it has discovered all the keystrokes it looks for the one used just after a bank website is entered. Those keystrokes are Mr. Giovannetti's name and password. See, it's taking me to his bank site right now. It seems that Mr. Giovannetti keeps his money at the San Francisco National Bank. That's his account right there."

"What does Giovannetti swindle846 mean? Are they on to us?"

"No." Norman laughed. "Giovannetti is his log in swindle846 is his password. Watch this. I simply enter his log in code." Norman typed, G-I-O-V-A-N-N-E-T-T-I. "And, his password." He punched the keys, S-W-I-N-D-L-E-8-4-6. "And, bingo, we're in."

Norman looked up at Red. "Looks like Mr. Giovannetti has quite a bit of cash. How much money would you like?"

Red's face spread into a broad smile. "Well, let's not get too greedy. I don't want anyone to know what has happened until after we rob the Wasserman. How about two thousand dollars?"

Red watched anxiously as Norman punched in \$2,000.00, and then sent the transfer of funds to their account in the Copiapo Bank of Chile. Norman pressed ENTER and the transaction was executed. Red made a mental note to call his brother once he left Norman's. He would have his brother cash out the \$2,000.00 and then redeposit it in another account, just in case anyone got smart and tried to steal their money back. Now it was Red's turn to dance around the room.

Red said, "One more test. That cute little Evelyn Rose will test The Hunt at Action Trucking. Then we're ready for Wasserman International."

Red had had enough of Norman for one day. He left the little apartment abruptly.

Norman Fitzwald returned to the tiny table out on his balcony and called for Betty. "I've done it Betty. The Hunt works."

Norman answered himself in that high pitched voice of his, "I knew you could do it honey. Let's eat."

"Oh Betty, I'm so sorry. It looks like dinners gone cold."

"I don't care Norman. I'm so proud of you; I could eat cold spinach and not notice."

CHAPTER 13

The next morning, Naydas found herself all alone. Things were tight in the Rascondas household, so Mrs. Rascondas worked three jobs in order to pay the rent. Naydas had heard her mother peek in on her. She could tell that her mother was still worried about her, but there was no reason to worry. Naydas felt fine. She showered and then went to the kitchen to help herself to a bowl of Lucky Charms. She had only eaten half a bowl when she got the idea to call Mosi.

She told him that The Hunt was too incredible to talk about over the phone. Mosi tried to pry information from her, but Naydas wouldn't break down, after all she was The Daus, she loved teasing her friends. She smiled at the thought of Mosi being so envious. Mosi agreed to call everyone. He would tell the rest of the gang to meet at her house. Naydas returned to her bowl of Lucky Charms, while Mosi did all her social planning. After her fourth bowl, Naydas stopped eating and went to the couch to wait for her friends.

At 12:39 there was a knock at the door, and Naydas called, "Enter!"

The door opened and Mosi Maehat stepped into the Rascondas's living room. "Okay, give it up girl. Tell us about The Hunt, It awesome, isn't it?" Mosi's face was beaming with excitement. "Did you hear about Bruno and Evelyn? The skinheads tried to kill them. Then they met up with Lawrence Charles Crisp. He actually gave them a ride to the hospital."

Tommy Sanstrom was right on his heels, following Mosi to the couch. They both sat so close to Naydas that she had to lean up on the armrest and sit cross-legged. Naydas grimaced at Mosi. Bruno was the next one through the door. He walked in silently and sat across from Naydas in her mother's favorite chair. Tetsu Wong, Evelyn Rose, and Howard Huxley were last. They all squeezed onto a pair of old beanbag chairs in the center of the room.

Naydas remembered the night before. She wondered for a brief moment what had happened after Bruno and Evelyn ran off. Had she heard gunshots, or was that just her imagination? And, what was Mosi talking about with the skinheads and Lawrence Crisp? Naydas found it difficult to concentrate. She kept thinking about The Hunt. Was the dragon interrupting her thoughts, or was it the confounded red haired boy? She tried to picture him, but his image kept going blurry. Naydas sat still. She was lost in thought, thinking about The Hunt.

Bruno said, "Last night was no big deal. Let's hear about The Hunt." He looked over to Evelyn. "You're supposed to use The Hunt on Monday, right?"

Evelyn nodded.

"I want to make sure its safe. Something feels funny."

Testu said, "Maybe it's Indian instincts."

Tommy started to laugh. "Indian instincts. You just make that up? That's funny."

"Let's hear about The Hunt already!" Mosi was fidgeting with excitement.

Tetsu said, "I want to hear about the skinheads. I'm scared. Why wasn't Red there to protect us?"

Howard came to Red's defense. "Well, Testu, you know, just because we're one of Red's doesn't mean we can walk the streets naked."

Tetsu shot Howard a hard look. "We weren't naked Howard. What in the world are you talking about? Red should have been there."

Bruno said, "Last night is over and done. I want to hear about The Hunt."

Naydas seemed to snap out of her trance. "The Hunt is crazy! It's the best game I've ever played. It's even better than Medusa at Six Flags." She could see the envy in Mosi's eyes. "Everything feels so real. I really thought that I was a princess. I lived in the most incredible castle. The walls were made of stone, and they all had rugs hanging from them."

Naydas did not mention the fact that she had been thin within The Hunt. She knew that would make Tommy laugh. "I was looking at one of the rugs when this obnoxious red haired boy showed up. I started giv'n him the business; you know just push'n him around a bit. But then he started to grow. He turned into a freaking dragon."

They were glued to her every word. Even that little prissy of a prep-school-girl Evelyn Rose stared at her in wonder. A scratch at the back wall distracted Naydas. It was coming from the outside wall - just under the picture window. She knew what it was in an instant. The dragon had found her.

In Naydas's mind she could almost see the dragon crouching below the window, waiting for the right moment to strike. She knew the dragon hated her. It hated her for leaving the game. It wanted to finish her, to eat her and crunch on her bones. Naydas lost all rational thought. She screamed and stood up, moving in her waddling way towards the door. Her only chance was to flee before the dragon could catch her. She threw the door open and made a run for it.

At first nobody moved. They thought she was joking. But this was no joke. Bruno was the first one to his feet. He race to the door. A moment later the entire gang was chasing Naydas. She ran helter-skelter into the stairwell, stumbling down the steps and into the lobby. Naydas shot out the front door and crossed from one side of the street to the other. She paid no attention to the cars that raced past. It was a miracle that she did not get hit. Bruno was closing in on her. He reached out and was about the wrap his finger about her shoulders when Naydas dived into a clump of rhododendrons. The bush was grew from a cut out section within the sidewalk. There were two bushes, one on each side of a lobby entrance. The bushes had been planted years ago when this part of the city was still a nice place to live. Naydas pulled the branches before her hiding her face behind the green leaves.

Bruno knelt down in front of the leafy bush. "Naydas, what in the world are you doing?"

Naydas was crying through her words. "It's the dragon. That boy I told you about, he's really a dragon. He's after me. He wants to eat me."

Tommy laughed so hard he fell to his knees. "She's lost it! Oh my god, she's really lost it! We need to get her to the loony bin!"

Evelyn slapped Tommy. "Shut up! You can be such a jerk, Tommy!"

Naydas continued her insane ranting. "Do you see him? I know he's out there. I heard him sneaking behind my apartment. He must have followed me. He's come out of the game and now he's going to crunch on my bones." She looked at Bruno, "Will you kill it for me, Bruno? Will you kill the dragon?"

Now both Tommy and Mosi burst into laughter. Tetsu and Evelyn pushed them away from Naydas so she wouldn't hear.

"There's no dragon, Naydas. It's just us; Evelyn, Tetsu, Mosi, Tommy and Howard. There is no dragon. I think the game felt so real that you just think the dragon is here. But it's not, Naydas. It was just a game."

"I think the only way to kill that dragon is to go back into the game and slice its head off. I saw a soft spot on its neck. We have to go back into the game. Will you come with me Bruno? Will you come into The Hunt and help me kill the dragon?"

"I'll tell you what, I'll check out The Hunt, but I don't want you going back into that game."

Once in the house, Naydas collapsed onto the couch and quickly fell asleep. Everyone hung out until Mrs. Rascondas got home. She arrived to find her house full of cartoon watching kids.

Bruno told Mrs. Rascondas that Naydas was not feeling well, and that she had passed out on the couch. He was careful not to mention Red. Evelyn had pointed out the uncertainty of what Red. If Mrs. Rascondas got in his face, there was no telling what he might do. There was more to The Hunt than just a game, and Red had flash temper. It was best to keep Mrs. Rascondas in the dark a little longer.

With Mrs. Rascondas to watch over her daughter everyone headed for home. Bruno and Evelyn went a little out of their way in order to walk Tetsu to her front stoop. Once she was safely home they headed towards Eddy Street.

“Bruno – I’m worried. Naydas has lost her mind. Good Lord, she tried to hide in a clump of bushes ñ from a dragon.” There was panic in her eyes, and her lips pursed at the corners, in an attempt to hide her fear.

Bruno stopped. He reached over taking hold of her both her hands. “Don’t worry. I’m not going to let anything happen to you.”

“What about Red?”

“What about him?”

“I don’t want to get him mad. He’s dangerous. You may be my Navajo warrior, but he’s insane. I’m not going to do anything that could get you hurt.”

“Don’t worry about Red. I can handle him.”

Evelyn’s face turned into a hard wall of determination. “I’m going to play The Hunt. I have to. Otherwise Red going to go crazy.”

“I can...”

“You can’t stop me Bruno. I have to play it. If I don’t play – Red’s coming after us. Don’t ask me how I know. I just know. And I don’t want anyone getting hurt because of me, especially you.”

Bruno held Evelyn’s hands close to his chest. He stared into her eyes. It was a hard look, not of anger, but of concern. “I’m not going to change your mind, am I?”

“Nope.”

“Okay, here’s the deal. Tomorrow after school you go to your mom’s work. Go ahead and try out Red’s game. But I’m coming with you. I’m going to take Naydas’s helmet, and I’m going into The Hunt with you. That way, we can help one another. How does that sound?”

Relief washed over Evelyn’s face. “I don’t know why, but I think I’ll be safe as long as you’re there with me.” She reached over pulling Bruno close and hugging him tightly. “You make me feel safe, like I used to feel when I was small. My dad used to do that. But then he turned into a low-down philanderer. He abandoned my mother and I. Now we’re trapped in the Tenderloin.”

“It’s going to be alright Evelyn. I’m glad you came to the Tenderloin.”

“There are some good parts.” She smiled, letting her green eyes pull Bruno’s to hers. They walked again, heading toward Eddy Street and their homes.

CHAPTER 14

The halls of Sir Francis Drake Middle School seemed darker than normal to Naydas. She saw shadowy movements out of the corner of her eye. The halls were crowded with students making their way from one class to another. Naydas knew the dragon was among them. He was probably using his magic to appear like that stupid, red-headed boy, so that no one would notice him.

Naydas yelled, "I know you're out there. What do you want?" Naydas waited for an answer, but there was no reply.

One of the students next to her grabbed her neck and whispered, "I want to suck your blood!"

"Get out of my face."

Normally Naydas would have laughed, but not today. Today, she was scared. She knew that the dragon had followed her. She kept hearing his raspy breath. But every time she turned he vanished. Once she could have sworn that she saw his swirling smoke, but she was not quick enough to catch the dragon himself.

Students backed away from Naydas as if she were diseased. She hurried down the hall and into Mr. White's U. S. History Class, taking her seat near the back of the room. The other students found their seats and the bell rang. Mr. White walked into the class, and for once Naydas was happy to see her portly teacher.

The dragon seemed to fade away when Mr. White began his lecture. He asked for responses to a novel the class was reading. Naydas was happy. It was a rare occasion when she did her homework. This was one of those occasions. She had read, *Daily Life on a Southern Plantation*, all the while thinking about her heritage and the plight of African American Slaves.

She sat in her desk thinking about the novel. What would she share with Mr. White? She tried to remember something impressive from the book. She thought about the white plantation owners. The women were so prissy. Her mind drifted, pulling her to another reality, to her life as a princess, back to *The Hunt*.

Naydas felt thin again. Her rich skin shimmered on high cheekbones, and she had the authority of royalty. She closed her eyes letting herself drift off to another place and time. At first everything was bliss. She felt happy, but more than that she felt powerful and important. The sensation of power last only a moment before she felt the presence of the dragon. His raspy breathing echoed within her mind, his claws scraping at her very soul.

She opened her eyes. She was back at Drake Middle School, but the dragon had returned with her. She knew he was in the next classroom, the one just behind hers. Naydas look at the back wall. He was on the other side. It would be easy for him to bust through the wall. He would eat her in one gulp.

Naydas knew she had to get out of the class, and quickly. She stood up, searching for an escape. She was in the back of the class. It was a seat she had always liked in the past, it kept a good amount of distance between her and any over zealous teachers that wanted her to do work. But today, she wished that she had chosen a seat closer to the door. It was no use. There were too many kids, too many books scattered on the floor. She would trip and fall if she went for the front door. The dragon would have her. She needed another way out. Naydas looked at the window. The window was closed. But, it was still her best hope.

Naydas heard the dragon crash through the wall. She could feel him rushing toward her. She stood up and made a mad dash for the window; twisting her 250 pounds one way and then

another, racing to escape. She ran in a fury, knocking over Simon Hopkin's desk. She was close to the window and felt certain that she would make her escape. Her only chance was to dive through the glass. Naydas swung her arms forward, leaping now, like some crazy gorilla.

Something wrap around her legs and bit down. It was the dragon. He caught her. In a moment she would feel his teeth crunch down on her legs.

Bruno Vic had been watching Naydas. When she called out to the imaginary boy in the hall Bruno got himself ready. He wondered how long would Naydas be affected by The Hunt.

Bruno snuck into Naydas's U.S. History class. He sat in the back, three seats to the left of Naydas. In the middle of class she stood and ran pill mill. She knocked over a desk, and lunged toward the closed window. Bruno moved, covering the distance between himself and Naydas with the speed of a young brave. She was diving now, her arms outstretched. Bruno dove, too. He wrapped his arms about her legs and pulled them tightly to his chest.

Naydas's hands came dangerously close to the window, but Bruno stopped her just before they crashed through the glass. They both fell to the floor. Bruno pinned her to the ground, holding her tight. He leaned in.

"It's just me, Naydas. You're safe now. But, if the principal is called - Red's going to find out. He won't be happy, so follow my lead."

Bruno stood up. "Sorry, Mr. White. Naydas and I have Theater Class with Mrs. Findgel. Our assignment is to do an improvisational scene in front of other students. Is it alright if I ask the class how believable our act was?"

Mr. White huffed and puffed a little, and then he said, "Mrs. Findgel is going to have to learn that a classroom is not some place to conduct her theatrical experiments. Yes, ask your question."

Bruno had no idea what he wanted to ask, so he said, "Could you please raise your hand if you thought Naydas was really going to dive through that window?"

Everyone raised his or her hands, including Mr. White, who was now smiling.

Naydas began to calm down. Her breathing slowed and her body relaxed. Bruno released her and she stood up. His broad shoulders and Navajo skin gave him the look of some famous actor. His dark eyes scanned the room, and he gave a gleaming smile. Every one started clapping at their performance.

Naydas said, "Stay with me Bruno, will you?"

Angelica Thompson was a college graduate, but until now, she never worked a day in her life. Her father was a blue-collar worker, and her mother stayed at home to raise the children. Angelica went to college on a full scholarship for academics. Two months after graduation she married Evelyn's father. Now that he was not around she had to work. She had no work experience, but John Action hired her as a security guard.

The job was simple; all she had to do was sit in the little room with TV monitors that were hooked up to cameras showing various parts of the building. If any gangs came around and started tagging, or in any way vandalizing the building, she was to call police. Angelica was proud of her daughter. Even now, living in the slums of the Tenderloin District, Evelyn looked like a movie star. Mrs. Thompson showed Evelyn and Bruno to John Action's office.

Mr. Action had shown Mrs. Thompson how to work his computer. It was no secret that he liked her. He frequently dropped in on her hoping to spark a romantic interest and start dating Angelica.

Like Naydas, Evelyn asked her mother if she could use her boss's computer. Mrs. Thompson offered one of the computers in the monitoring room, but Evelyn needed privacy.

Once Evelyn and Bruno were situated within Mr. Action's office, Mrs. Thompson headed back to her monitoring room. Mr. Action had a brand new computer with a large screen sitting atop his desk. Evelyn hated computer games. To Evelyn, a computer was meant for research, for writing papers, not for wasting your time on some stupid game. She resolved to play this game for exactly one minute, and then turn off the stupid thing. That way she could tell Red that she had played his idiotic game. She assumed that there was some sort of log in at the beginning of the game. She would log her name onto the registry and then close out. If Red checked on her he would see that she had indeed logged onto the game.

She pushed the thought of Red out of her mind, and looked over at Bruno. He was plugging in the gray USB wires that ran from the back of each helmet into two of the ports on the front of the computer. Neither said a word. They were almost ready to enter The Hunt. She took a deep breath and felt herself relax a little. She was glad that Bruno was with her.

Bruno strapped his helmet on pulling the chin strap tight while Evelyn loaded The Hunt's disc. She looked over at Bruno. He seemed unrecognizable in the big black helmet. She wondered if there was another way, some way for her and Bruno to avoid playing The Hunt. Of course the answer was no, so she pulled the dark helmet over her head, blocking out the light from the room. She sat still, afraid to breath, looking into the blackness of her helmet's visor.

The Hunt whirled into action and Evelyn felt a rush of trepidation. She ran her fingers across the smooth surface of the helmet. Something deep within her screamed at her, telling her to pull the helmet off her head - to grab Bruno and go to the police. Surely the police could put a stop to Red.

She reached up to lift the helmet. She needed to think this whole thing through a little more, but just as her fingers touched the smooth surface thousands of tiny needles shot out from the helmet's inner lining and pierced into her scalp. Fear raced through her.

A new world opened up before Evelyn's eyes. The site was breathtaking. She was no longer within the filthy Tenderloin District of San Francisco, no longer crowded in by dirty buildings, or low-life gang members. Evelyn breathed deeply and smiled. She was home. She stood amid a field of sweet smelling wildflowers with rolling hills in every direction. The tips of her castle's parapets were peeking out just over a distant hilltop.

She was a princess, the heir to a majestic castle and this beautiful realm. She no longer remembered her life as a struggling teenager attending a gang-torn middle school. Her life was perfect. She wore a silky, white dress that blew against her soft skin. Evelyn skipped across the meadow, humming a lovely melody. She stop atop a nearby hill, and then lay down letting the sun warm her body. She closed her eyes and listened to sounds of birds singing in the distant trees.

A familiar voice called out to her. "Hello, my beautiful young princess."

It was her father, the king. He had a slightly graying hair, with a short cropped beard, and piercing eyes that seemed to be searching for hidden truths. His clothing was made of the finest silken fabric, and he wore his royal red robe. He had been gone for so long, but now he was back. Something deep inside the princess cried out with thankful joy at the sight of her father. It was as if she expected to never see him again. But, of course, that was ridiculous. She pushed the thought out of her mind, and stood up to hug her father. "Daddy, I've missed you so much!"

"Is that any way for a princess to behave? You must show your royal manner at all times. You will be a queen one day. Do you want your subjects knowing that you were a giddy and impulsive child when you were when you were younger?"

"Daddy, I'm no child." She stepped back soaking in the presence of her father. "Daddy can we have a picnic?"

A picnic basket magically appeared before them complete with silverware and fine china. The king sat beside his daughter upon an embroidered blanket. The succulent smell of roast duck and wild rice rose up and into their nostrils. For desert they each had a piece of cherry pie. They laughed as they ate, reminiscing about the princess's younger days within the castle, how when she was only three years old she would try to catch the small sparrows that roosted within the castle's window ledges. The king took his final bite of cherry pie, and then lay his fork down delicately upon his plate. He leaned back placing his hands behind his head and lay on the soft ground. The princess lay down beside her father. Nothing could steal this moment.

A rumble rose from a distant line of trees, and the king sat up looking out into the forest. The princess looked at her father and then toward the forest. Something big rose within the thick branches, crashing through green canopy and out into the open blue sky.

It was a dragon, a mighty beast with powerful wings that pulled it up into the air. It raced toward their private picnic. The princess's first thought was that this was impossible, that dragons were only make-believe. Yet, here it was flying closer and closer.

The dragon was enormous, with thick red scales covering its body. Its wings were black with red veins crisscrossing throughout its thirty-foot wingspan. His wings beat down upon the air propelling him with unbelievable speed. The creature flew over them. His jaws opened and a firestorm shot forth scorching the picnic area. The princess and her king backpedaled across the grassy knoll. They moved quickly, tripping over their own feet in an attempt to escape the flames. The dragon tipped its wings making a banking turn. It raced toward them.

The princess stared at the dragon. There was something familiar it. She knew this creature. Its face was unforgiving and hateful with bright red scales. But it was the eyes that sparked something within the princess. The creature's right eye was a hard orb that search for something to destroy. But the other eye, the creature's left eye, was damaged. Perhaps this creature had been in a battle when it was younger, or maybe it was born with one unseeing and milky eye. The princess searched her memory, wondering how she knew this creature.

There was a thunderous roar as the dragon beat its wings backward drawing himself to a hovering stop above the princess and king. Without warning the dragon shot its head forward, opening its maw and spitting out an incinerating blast of flames. The fire engulfed the king, burning him and killing him instantly. The princess stood in stunned horror. She was all-alone.

Bruno Vic Vizcarra knew instantly that he had made a grave error in entering The Hunt. When he had first put the helmet on everything went pitch black. Something in the back of his mind pleaded with him to rip the helmet from his head. But Bruno could not abandon Evelyn. He would never leave her.

An instant later his head was on fire with stinging pain as thousands of needles pierced his skin, stimulating nerve endings within his scalp. A new world materialized before him and Bruno was lost within The Hunt.

Bruno Vic was no longer himself. He had somehow been changed completely. He had a vague recollection of who he had once been. A long time ago he was fourteen years old, but that was a long time ago, maybe even in another lifetime, perhaps only in a dream. Now he was a king, the king of this beautiful realm before him. He looked out at the rolling hill, at the distant forest, and the crystal clear skies. The king smiled in satisfaction. He was walking up a small knoll when he spied his lovely daughter.

"Hello, my beautiful young princess."

The princess hugged him. "Daddy, I've missed you so much."

The king wondered what his daughter was talking about. He had not left the castle in years. Perhaps his daughter was simply feeling the pressures of being a princess. After all, she

was still young, and quite impetuous. She needed his strong guidance in order to mature into a sensible leader.

“Is that any way for a princess to behave? You must show your royal manner at all times. You will be a queen one day. Do you want your subjects knowing that you were a giddy and impulsive child when you were younger?”

“Daddy, I’m no child.” His daughter stepped back and looked up into his eyes. For an instant she looked hurt, then her impetuous side broke free and she said, “Daddy can we have a picnic?”

The king was amazed to find that his daughter was a wizard. She must be a wizard, for how else could she make a beautiful picnic basket complete with silverware and china, roast duck, and cherry pie magically appear. A broad smile crossed his face. Wizards were rare and to have one that would one day be queen was truly a gift from god, a gift they would use to help all his people.

The king sat upon the blanket and enjoyed lunch with his daughter. When he was finished he laid his head back, closing his eyes. He had only a moment of peace before he heard a thunderous sound escaping from the near by forest. He sat up searching the distance. Something rose up from the trees. It raced toward them. Legends throughout the kingdom had foretold about a terrible red-scaled dragon that ravaged the people for years and years, but it had been so long ago that no one had actually seen it. Now the king watched in horror as the dragon raced toward them.

The dragon’s wings beat hard pulling him through the air, and in no time the creature was flying over them. His jaws opened and a firestorm shot forth scorching the picnic area. The king and his daughter ran backward in an attempt to escape the flames. The dragon tipped its wings, making a banking turn. It was flying directly toward them.

The king starred up at this vicious creature. He felt a familiar recognition. There was something about this dragon. Its face was hard and intolerant with bright red scales. And, there was something about its eye.

The king stood his ground. Without warning, the dragon shot its head forward, opening its maw and spit out a burst of fire. The king raised his hands in an attempt to stop the inferno, but the flames engulfed him, and the king that was Bruno Vic fell to the ground burning to death.

Bruno Vic Vizcarra’s heart went into fibrillation and then stopped. He was sitting in a comfortable leather chair at Action Trucking, and he was having a heart attack. The king that he was playing within The Hunt had just died, and now Bruno Vic was about to suffer the same fate. The virtual reality game was so real it made Bruno believe that he was dying. His brain told his heart to stop pumping. Bruno’s eyes slid closed behind the dark visor.

If not for some inner instinct deep within Evelyn Rose, Bruno would have surely died.

A small part of Evelyn sensed that Bruno needed her. Her hand moved slowly, almost angelically. She touched Bruno’s hand ever so gently. It was a tender touch that rippled through Bruno, sending electrical impulses throughout his body. His heart clamped shut with the memory of lost love. Images raced through Bruno’s mind. He saw his father and his mother. Pain squeezed at his chest. Then he saw Evelyn Rose Thompson with her piercing green eyes, and her soft white skin. Bruno’s heart roared to life thumping with the devotion of young love.

Bruno Vic gasped for air. He was alive. No, more than that, he was a powerful knight kneeling upon the very spot where his king had been.

The princess looked down at her father. She was expecting a hideous sight, a crumpled mass of burning flesh. But that was not what lay before her. It seemed that the fire of the dragon had somehow changed the King. Now the king was gone, magically transported to another place. Kneeling where the king had been only a moment earlier was a young knight. He was crouched, holding a silver shield before the dragon.

A spark of recognition flashed within her mind. Did she know this knight? Was he something more than just a protector of the royal family? How had he magically appeared? The knight smiled.

He was her same age with deep brown eyes that seemed to hold a world of pain. What had this knight endured? His broad shoulder shifted and for a moment it looked as if he was about to tell her something important, but the dragon stepped toward them and the knight shifted back toward the beast.

The princess racked her brain trying to discover who this face belonged to, somehow knowing that his identity was the key to her survival.

The dragon's face wrinkled in rage. "Where is my crispy king? I want to feed on burnt bones. What have you done with my prey?"

The dragon's shot his head forward unleashing a burst of fire.

The princess that was Evelyn Rose knew that it was up to her to protect the young knight. Something deep within told her that he was the key to her survival; that if he died she would be lost forever. A strong intuition tickled the back of her mind. It was a calming sense, a feeling that none of this was real, that this was all some sort of wild dream.

If this were only a dream then it was all happening within her mind. And if that was the case, then she could control it. The princess knew what she had to do. She moved so swiftly that the flame seemed to stop in mid air. She lunged for her knight, wrapping her arms about him and holding him tight, while she imagined a peaceful lagoon.

The dragon's flames stretched out across the hilltop, but the princess and knight vanished. The beast lifted its head to the sky and let out a terrible roar.

The thundering sound of the dragon's fire storm vanished. The princess lifted her head. She knew for certainty now that she was within a dream, for how else could she simply wish herself to this beautiful place. She had transported both herself and her knight to a lagoon of greenish-blue water. Thousands of fish swam back and forth. Dark green ferns with delicate blue, purple, and yellow flowers surrounded the lagoon. At the far end of the lagoon was a high escarpment. It rose over a hundred feet, and had a waterfall spilling off its lip and into the lagoon. The princess smiled with a satisfaction and looked down at her knight. They were safe.

The young knight looked up at the princess. A lump caught in his throat. She had long flowing hair that shimmered like pink strawberries in the fading light. Her eyes sparkled, twinkling in unison with the green waters of the lagoon. The knight reached up placing his hand upon her face. He kissed her ever so gently on the cheek.

"I don't know how you did it, but you saved my life."

The princess that was Evelyn Rose pulled back. She remembered who she was. She remembered who her knight was too. But most importantly, she remembered why she had entered this virtual reality game. She suddenly understood why it was so dangerous. The Hunt was so vivid, so real that it made you forget that you were simply playing a game.

Her friend Naydas ñ was she actually calling Naydas her friend - believed the dragon escaped the confines of the game in order to hunt her within the real world. Evelyn knew she had to get out, but she wouldn't leave without her knight.

"Bruno, It's me, Evelyn."

The knight looked puzzled. "I have gone by the name knight for so long that I almost forgot my first name. But I could never forget you ñ not you Princess Evelyn. I am sworn to protect you."

The lagoon sat at the bottom of a horseshoe outcropping of rock that rose up in a circular wall. Evelyn stood at the end of the horseshoe where the land opened and a thin river flowed out from the lagoon. On the opposite side, a showering waterfall spilled over the high precipice creating a rainbow as it tumbled down the hard rock face. Although the lagoon seemed peaceful, Evelyn knew that danger lurked nearby. Then she saw him. The dragon sat crouched upon a big rock beside the waterfall's crest. He was looking down upon them with a reptilian smile that Evelyn recognized immediately. It was Red. The dragon had been created in the image of Red.

The dragon's claws dug into the hard rock. He lunged into the air. Dipping his head, he dove toward the lagoon. A death screech echoed off the rock. His wings beat hard, carrying him toward his prey. He was half way across the lagoon when he shot forth a firestorm.

The knight quickly pulled his princess behind a large bolder. The flames bounced off the rock sending sparks dancing into the air. But the dragon did not stop. He raced across the lagoon, charging his prey, sweeping down and plucking the knight from behind the bolder. The dragon lifted him up and into the air. Clawed talons ripped into the knight's armor. The dragon flew high.

He banked back toward the waterfall, circling the far side of the lagoon. The beast landed on the same rock it had been perched on only a moment ago. He sat, balancing upon his tail and three clawed talons. He held the knight within his fourth talon. The knight by his chest hanging him face down over the fall's precipice. The river of water tumbled from the escarpment to the lagoon below.

The dragon opened his jaws showing its deadly fangs. He let out a terrible screech as he squeezed the knight's armor; crushing him like a tin can.

The knight tried to scream, but he could not. The dragon spit a torrent of fire into the air. He released the knight, letting him fall into the cascade of water. The knight tumbled down the escarpment, his armored body smashing against the rock wall again and again as he plummeted toward the lagoon.

The princess that was Evelyn Rose was shocked. She almost forgot who she was. She marveled at the ability of this virtual reality game. It was amazing the way it pulled you into the fantasy. As the knight's crushed and crumpled body fell toward the water below, Evelyn reminded herself that this was just a game, a game that she could control.

Bruno was falling to his death. But, Evelyn could save him. She could do anything she wanted. It was no different than controlling a bad dream and Evelyn had done that many times. As the knight splashed into the water, Evelyn dove to his rescue.

She swam across the lagoon meeting him as he sank. As she had done in so many of her dreams Evelyn breathed under water. She grabbed her knight, holding him in her arms as they sank to the bottom of the lagoon.

"Bruno, you can breathe. It's just a game. This isn't really happening. You and I are sitting at Action Trucking. We're playing Red's virtual-reality game."

The knight looked confused. He shook his head, not understanding her words. "It has been an honor to serve you Princess Evelyn."

Evelyn knew he needed air. If he didn't get to the surface he would drown. But his ribs were broken, crushed by the beast above, and he could not swim to the surface. It was up to Evelyn. Only she could save him now. She would have to use the magic she possessed within The Hunt. She placed her finger upon Bruno's lips.

"Breath!"

Bruno Vic gasped. "Are you a wizard, Princess? That is the second time you have saved me. I thought it was I who was supposed to be protecting you."

She placed her hand on his chest and closed her eyes. The knight's crumpled armor vanished. She opened her eyes looking into Bruno's. "Breathe deep into your lungs and your broken ribs shall be healed."

The knight did as he was told. His bones mended. Evelyn grabbed Bruno by the hand and together they walked toward the base of the escarpment. She wanted to be directly below the tumbling waterfall where the dragon could not see them. Evelyn knew he was up there, knew he was waiting with a hateful desire to destroy her precious knight, and she simply would not let that happen.

They did not have much time. This was her only chance to make Bruno remember. She had to make him remember or he could end up as crazed as Naydas. She stopped turning and facing him. Above them the water pounded, spinning and swirling in a violent crashing that obscured the dragon's view. They were safe here, at least for the moment.

"Bruno, I need you to remember! We are sitting at Action Trucking. We are playing a computer game, a virtual reality game called The Hunt. This is just a game. You are not really a knight, and I am not really a princess. You are Bruno Vic Vizcarra and my name is Evelyn Rose Thompson. Bruno, do you remember?"

At first the knight looked puzzle. Perhaps he thought that she was the one who had gone crazy. But just then a spark of recognition twinkled in his eyes, and a broad smile crossed Bruno Vic's face. "Oh, my God. This game is a trip. It's me Evelyn. Bruno - I'm back. Now let's go kick some butt."

Bruno walked toward the shore. His strides were long and sure, but with each step he slowly forgot who he was. The shiny armor of the knight magically reappeared upon his back, and by the time he reached the surface Bruno was lost within the fantasy of The Hunt. Once again, he was a valiant knight; ready to battle the dragon.

Evelyn's head broke the surface just in time to hear Bruno yell out to the dragon. "I'm coming for you smelly lizard. Are you ready to die?"

He turned to Evelyn. "The beast almost had me, my lady. But thanks to your magic, I live to battle another day. Now, I shall bring this beast down, and we shall hang his scaly pelt upon the palace wall."

The dragon's fire danced across the water's surface. Evelyn reached for her knight. She needed to pull him back under the water where she could make him remember again. She had done it once, but he only remembered for a moment. She needed more time.

Evelyn had to think fast. She had to get Bruno out of this game. It was clear to her now that the game made you go insane. Too much time in here and the two worlds would start to mesh into one. That had to be what happened to Naydas. She had forgotten who she while playing the game. When she forgot who she was - a small portion of the game got into her subconscious, and became real.

Bruno was caught within the alluring fantasy of The Hunt. If she did not make him remember who he was he would be lost. Evelyn lunged for the knight. She grabbed him by the visor and pulled. The knight's head twisted and he went down with a splash. Bruno and Evelyn fell into the water as the blazing hot flames of the dragon scorched the surface.

CHAPTER 15

Red watched with happy anticipation as Norman Fitzwald's computer connected to Action Trucking's. He knew Evelyn was about to do battle with a terrible dragon. The dragon was The Hunt's worm, digging through files in search of the keystrokes that would allow access to all of the owner's personal information. Red had watched the excitement on Norman's face when Naydas played The Hunt. It was a look of sure delight. But now Norman had a different look upon his face. He looked confused. Norman turned to Red.

"Someone is in there with her."

"What?"

"It looks like there are two people playing the game. Does the girl have another helmet?"

Norman's computer screen was divided in half. It had two dragons chasing two knights. Red suddenly understood. "It's that damn Bruno Vic!" He whispered. "I just know it. I'll kill him." He cursed Naydas for bringing Bruno to his house that first night.

Norman tried to be helpful. "Maybe he got the other helmet from that black girl? What's her name, Nadundrus?"

"It's Naydas, you idiot." Red stood behind Norman clenching his teeth. "Can we still steal the money?"

"It's just taking a little longer because there's two players."

"Steal the damn money. I'll take care of Bruno." Red already had a plan. He had been thinking about it for some time now and the more he thought about it the better he liked the idea. He would call his good friend Phillip Todd Balmy. After all, it was Phillip Todd and Marek Savatski who had killed Bruno's father. It would be fitting to have them kill his son too. Red's smiled at the thought of releasing Phillip Todd and Marek upon Bruno.

Norman broke into Red's thoughts. "We've got it. We're in Red!"

Red looked at the computer screen.

"How much money do you want, Red?"

"Give me a thousand. Tomorrow we send Mosi to Wasserman International. He's been dying to play The Hunt. Tomorrow he'll get his chance. Make arrangements so that we can leave tomorrow night. We're should be able to get at least five or six million from Wasserman. That should set us up nicely in Copiapo." Red looked up at the ceiling for a moment, and then said, "Yes, \$1,000.00 will do just fine for today."

Norman punched a few keys and said, "We're a thousand dollars richer, and tomorrow we'll be millionaires."

Red thought to himself, tomorrow I'll be a millionaire. You'll be lucky to be alive. He pulled out his cell and dialed, placing the phone to his ear. "Daniel, remember that pick up I said you may need to make?" There was a short pause. "Get her." Red slapped his phone shut and stuffed it in his pocket.

CHAPTER 16

The dragon's fire boiled at the surface of the lagoon. The knight that was Bruno Vic looked confused.

"Why do you hold me back? I must stop this beast or it will surely destroy your entire palace?"

The waves heaved at the knight urging him on, pushing him towards the shore and a final battle with the horrid beast. The knight stepped into the shallow waters.

The princess screamed. "Bruno, don't get sucked into the game. It's not real. I'm real. Only me. Stay with me," Evelyn pleaded, but it was no use. She could see it in his eyes, a deep need to battle the dragon. It was a need that The Hunt had manifested. The knight turned and walked out of the water.

He was met with a blast of flames. The flames covered him completely. Evelyn knew that this time Bruno would die, so she acted on instinct, knowing that there had to be a way to stop the game, some way to shut the program down. She stepped out of the water and into the fire. She screamed into the on slot of flames. "End program!"

Evelyn shouted the two simple words with a conviction that burned deep within her, a conviction of love, of knowing that she could never bear to lose the bond between her and Bruno Vic.

A moment later, Evelyn was sitting in her chair at Action Trucking wearing the dark helmet and feeling slightly disoriented. She felt the needles retract; pulling from her scalp and releasing her from The Hunt.

CHAPTER 17

All the skinheads lived together. They shared a one room flat on the thirteenth floor of the Hadas Building on McAllister Street. You could see all the way to Ocean Beach from their picture window. Their kitchen and living room were one, forming a giant room cluttered with dirty dishes, food of all sorts and clothes left draped over the furniture and strewn across the floor.

The only room that offered any privacy at all was the bathroom; everything else was a single open space. There were twenty people, all laughing and carrying on as if they lived within a castle. Phillip Todd Balmy was sleeping in the corner. He had been up all night, carousing with his skinheads, and hadn't fallen asleep until just before noon. Someone had woken him at 5:30, but he wasn't ready to get up, so they let him sleep on.

An iron grip shook him awake. Phillip Todd sat up. "This had better be good. I was dreaming about killing Mobbers."

"Just wake your lazy ass up, damn it."

Red was standing above him.

Phillip Todd could count the number of people that he was afraid of on two fingers. One was his father who had made a habit of beating him each night when Phillip Todd was a boy. Of course, Phillip Todd put an end to that years ago. His father would never beat anyone again. The only other person who truly frightened Phillip Todd was now standing before him. Marek Savatski was gigantic, but he was as stupid as he was big. Red was different. He was more than just a little crazy; with a temper unlike any Phillip Todd had ever seen. Red was a vicious snake that would strike for no reason.

Phillip Todd laughed. "I was just about to get up anyway. What's up?"

"It's time, Phillip. Two members of my gang have disobeyed my instructions. They must be dealt with. That little punk, Bruno Vic Vizcarra, is one of them."

A smile came to Phillip Todd's lips. "You know I hate red-skins as much as I hate blacks and the little slant-eyed yellow ones. They're all the same to me; a sub-species that needs eradication. I already did the red-skin cop. Looks like I get to do his kid too."

"You can do what you like with Bruno. But the girl is mine." Red leaned forward a little so that his reptilian face was only inches from Phillip's. He let his milky eye do its work. "Touch her and you'll be dealing with me!"

Phillip Todd didn't like looking like a punk in front of his gang, but he wasn't ready to go after Red. "Is she white?"

Red nodded.

"Then, there's no worries. Why would I want to hurt one of my own? Don't get yourself so worked up Red. I'm a man of my word."

"I got my van outside. You come with me. We're going to get my two little gang members. They probably just left Action Trucking, so we'll have to be quick. Once we have them - you hold 'em. Don't do anything to either of them until I give you the Okay. I don't need the police involved. You got me?"

Phillip Todd nodded and the two headed out the flat. Marek Savatski started to get up, but Phillip shook his head and Marek sat down. A moment later Phillip Todd was sitting in a white van that Red had rented. They drove up McAllister to Franklin Street and headed north. Action Trucking was half a block west of Franklin on Geary Street. They should run into Bruno and Evelyn on their way home from the trucking company.

It was wintry weather and with day light savings it had been dark for some time now. The rain started and at first Red did not see any sign of his two gangers. He began tapping the steering wheel with dirty fingers, his one good eye searching the shadows as he drove. Red was sure he had missed them. But then, just as he was about to turn around and search closer to Eddy Street, he saw them. Red steered the van right at Evelyn. He hit the accelerator and was barreling down on her. For a moment it looked like he was going to mow her down. Phillip Todd started to laugh.

Bruno grabbed Evelyn and threw her as far as he could, clearing her from the oncoming van. He tried to jump out of the way himself, but Red swerved toward him. The van struck Bruno hard, sending him flying backward and rolling across the sidewalk.

Red was out of the van in an instant. He had a pair of handcuffs and quickly locked them about Bruno's wrists. Then he hauled Bruno to the back of the van. Phillip Todd grabbed the girl. He had a fist full of Evelyn's hair in one hand and the van's back door open with other. Red threw Bruno into the van, and turned on Evelyn. His face looked more reptile than human. Hungry eyes glared down at her and his hand clenched at the air as if he were squeezing the life out of some invisible person.

"I told you that this was an initiation, a test to see if I could trust you. I never said anything about playing The Hunt with a friend. Now..." Red took a few calming breathes, "you had better be on your best behavior or my friend here is going to kill your little boyfriend. Do you understand me?"

Evelyn looked at Bruno. He had a bruise on his cheek, but other than that he seemed to be fine. She nodded and then climbed into the back of the van.

Phillip Todd wondered for a moment about this Hunt thing. But then he realized he didn't really care. He just wanted to have a little fun with the Indian boy. Once this was all over he would put some distance between himself and Red. He really didn't like being around the crazy fool.

Red drove to Market Street and took that into the heart of the Financial District. He turned south on the Embarcadero looping around the city and back toward the Cargo District. Parts of the Cargo District were clean of trash and drug pushers, but other parts were even worse than the Tenderloin. Red drove to a seedier part of the Cargo where every form of lowlife walked the streets. He pulled the van to a stop next to a warehouse that looked surprisingly nice compared to all the buildings around it. The windows had white ashly spray all over them so that you could not see into the building. The door was metal, the kind that rolled up into a cylinder on top. Red stepped out of the van and walked to the back. He swung open the doors and pulled Bruno Vic out, dragging him by his cuffed hands. Bruno wobbled, but was able to stay on his feet.

Red looked into the van at Evelyn, "Follow me."

The zombies of the Cargo District barely noticed as the four made their way to the roll-up door. Red pounded four times in rapid succession and a moment later the metal door rolled up opening to a large warehouse. The floor was concrete with twenty-foot metal beams running up to a high ceiling. Red walked in dragging Bruno behind him. Off to the right was another pair of metal doors. Behind those doors Evelyn could hear several big dogs barking wildly. They sounded as if they wanted to tear into whoever had just entered their territory. Red walked to the far end of the warehouse and entered the bathroom. He released Bruno's right arm and locked the free cuff to a water pipe behind the toilet.

When he got back into the main room he said, "I hope nobody has to use that damn toilet."

Phillip Todd laughed. Red walked over and shook hands with the man who had opened the rolling door. "Phillip Todd, meet my good friend Daniel Pfeiffer. Daniel here is a champion pit-bull trainer. His dogs could eat a man whole in about an hour. Isn't that right Daniel?"

Daniel was nodding eagerly. It was obvious that he looked up to Red. "Could do it even faster if I didn't feed them for a couple a days."

Daniel Pfeiffer was the kind of man who had very few friends, and those he did have seemed to only like him for his abilities in training dogs to be the meanest in the city. He was well into his twenties, yet still had a lot of acne, and his nose was three sizes too big for his tiny face. "Who's the schoolgirl?"

Red ignored his question. "You still got that boat?" He was thinking about an alternative escape route, just in case things did not go as planned.

"Sure do. She's not pretty, not fast, but she floats, and no one ever notices an ugly green fishing boat, not in these waters."

Evelyn looked back toward the bathroom.

Red laughed. "Damn, you should have been a little faster. Why, I bet if Bruno hadn't stopped to push you out of the way... Well, I bet he'd be fine. You two might have even gotten away." He leaned in close so that his one good eye locked on hers. "Of course I would still get you. I would hunt you down and kill you both. So don't you dare try a thing, not nothin'. You got me?"

Evelyn cried silently, nodding with obedience.

"Daniel, you got the Mrs.?"

"You mean the lady? Yeah I got her. She's in the back with the dogs."

"Good. Bring her me." Red felt like a crazed gator closing in for the kill. He looked at Evelyn. Her eyes moved to Phillip Todd. She was looking at his tattoo. It was a picture of a swastika and the words, 'White Power' underneath. Red's face wrinkled with lines of satisfaction. Surely by now Evelyn knew that both she and Bruno Vic were as good as dead. That is unless he decided to let them go free.

Evelyn stood. She walked over to Red. Silent tears remained, but she seemed to regain her composure. "Red, I am sorry that I played your stupid game with Bruno. I didn't really see the harm in it. I mean after all it's just a game – isn't it?"

Red snapped out. He grabbed her arm and dragged her to the far corner of the warehouse. His voice was strained, "I don't want to hear another word from you. You understand me? Not a word about The Hunt. Now - you can either be cuffed up like your little boyfriend, or you can sit out there quietly. Which is it?"

"I'm sorry Red. I didn't mean to be disrespectful. I'm just scared."

"Just sit. Phillip Todd and Daniel will keep an eye on you. If you are a good girl, I'll let you and Bruno go home tomorrow."

Evelyn followed Red back to the center of the room and sat on the floor next to a faint pink color that stained the floor.

"That's a blood stain from the fights Daniel holds." Red laughed. "Damn, this is a whole new world for you isn't it?"

Daniel walked in holding the arm of Vivian Vizcarra.

"Mrs. Vizcarra so nice of you to join us. Your boy has given me a bit of irritation."

"Where is Bruno? Evelyn, have they hurt you?"

"I'm okay." More tears flowed at the sight of Mrs. Vizcarra.

"Let's not be impolite. Introductions first. You already met Daniel. I would like you to meet Phillip Todd."

"I'm not interested in meeting any Indian lover. I only kill their husbands."

Recognition flared in Vivian's eyes. She flew across the room and slapped Phillip Todd so hard that he fell to one knee. The skinhead lunged for Vivian but Red caught him.

Red wrapped his fingers about Phillip Todd's neck. He squeezed just hard enough to let him know that no one made a move without permission. Red lifted Phillip Todd into the air and looked up at him. "You have a simple job. Keep everyone here. Keep them right where I put them. No one is to be touched until I give the word. Is that understood, you stupid bigot?"

Phillip Todd squeaked, "Yes."

"Good. Come Vivian; let's pay a visit to your son." Red dropped Phillip Todd and headed for the bathroom. Vivian followed. Before they reached the bathroom Red placed his finger to his lips. He held Vivian behind the wall and leaned against the doorframe.

Bruno was sprawled across the tiny room. His face was beginning to swell, and his arm was cocked back behind the toilet where it was cuffed to the pipe. Red was silent for a moment. Even though things had not gone as planned, things were working quite nicely.

"Guess who that was in the van with us? Let me give you a hint. He hates Indians and about eight years ago he killed a cop."

"You bastard." Bruno tried to get to his feet but his cuffed hand held him back.

"Ah, ah, ah, I think you want to be nice to me. I'm leaving Evelyn with my two friends out there. The last thing you want is to piss me off again. And there's more. Guess who else has come to visit?"

"I'm going to get you Red. I don't care how long it takes, you're going down."

"Vivian, tell your son to be nice." Red pulled Mrs. Vizcarra to the open doorway. He held the back of her neck. "Can you get him to calm down? I would hate to have him end up like your husband."

He threw Vivian into the bathroom. Mrs. Vizcarra wrapped her arms around her son.

"Oh Bruno, can you ever forgive me? I know I've been lost to you. When your father died..." She paused, "I died, or at least a part of me died. I loved your father so much, and just like that he was gone. I needed time to grieve. I told myself, just take a day or two - drown your sorrows. But a day turned into a month, and a month into years. I missed so much. I missed your birthdays, watching you grow from a boy to a young man. I was there, but it was like watching my life through a veil; nothing is crisp or clear. I can never get those years back, never live the time that I should have shared as mother and son. But I promise you this. Never again will I touch a drop of alcohol. I will be a mother to you from now on and forever. I..."

"Touching, but there will be no more tender moments from now unless your boy here calms down and does what I tell him."

"I love you mom. I've always known you'd come back to me. I miss him too. I miss dad every day of my life. But we can miss him together. We can start living life as a family again. And, even though dad isn't with us, I know he's watching over us."

Red reached in grabbing Vivian and pulling her back. "So, you're going to behave while I'm gone?"

Bruno looked up at Red. He sank down against the toilet bowl and nodded.

Red knew he had him. Bruno would never do anything to hurt his mother, or his precious girlfriend. The big man turned his back on Bruno and escorted Vivian back to the main warehouse.

Phillip Todd looked at Red as he walked to the center of the room, but Red didn't stop to say goodbye, or give any further instructions. He simply set Vivian down next to Evelyn and headed for the rolling door. He lifted it and hurried to the white rental van. As he drove off he looked down at the two brown grocery bags. Time was running low.

Red made a quick stop to the Financial District. He placed two NO PARKING standards across the street from the Transamerica Pyramid Building and looked up at the buildings topmost point. Wasserman International was up there, just waiting for him to topple their fund into his account in Chile. He returned to the van, heading for the Maehat's.

He wouldn't be able to get Mosi until the morning, but he had a plan. He would snatch him in the morning, before Mosi left for school. Red had been awake for almost thirty-six hours now, yet he was not tired and knew that even if he tried he would be unable to sleep. Perhaps he could catch a few moments of rest if he were outside Mosi's house. He drove up Golden Gate Avenue and parked two doors down from the Maehat's. He turned the engine off and closed his eyes hoping to catch a catnap before morning.

CHAPTER 18

Bruno Vic had been awake all night. His left arm was cuffed to the back of the toilet. He was laying face down breathing slow and thinking about his mother. She quit drinking. Bruno smiled and laid his head on the cold concrete floor. Perhaps they could have a normal life again, or at least as normal as possible without a dad. But first, they had to survive the ordeal with Red. There was no way Red would let them live. Bruno had underestimated the evil within Red once. He would not do it again.

Anger flared anew. He finally knew the man responsible for his father's death. Phillip Todd, the leader of the skinheads. Bruno wanted revenge. He didn't know how, but he was going to put Phillip Todd where he belonged. It didn't matter that Bruno wasn't old enough to be a cop. He would lock him up, put in Henshaw and let him rot. Then Bruno would visit him once a year and ask him, 'how do you like living with all the 'impures'?"

Bruno had plenty of time to think. His mind drifted back to that night at the hospital. It was the night his father passed. On his deathbed, Bruno's father made a request. His father had asked him to do the impossible. Now those dying words kept pulling at his mind, nagging at him to fulfill his father's wish. He pictured his dad lying on that in that cold hospital room, reaching up and whispering, "Son, I need you to do me a favor. I need you to forgive Marvin. None of this is his fault. He's a good man, and he did what he could. It's time for me to return to my father. I love you son, and I'll always be watching over you, my spirit protecting you."

Bruno despised Marvin. He was a mole. Why did he have to hide? Why couldn't he of stood tall and helped Bruno's dad? Marvin should have never run. If need be, he should have died beside his partner.

Images from The Hunt flashed through Bruno's mind. Was he so very different from the knight? The knight would give his life for the ones he loved, so would Bruno. The knight had a powerful thirst for vengeance. He never stopped trying to kill the dragon, and Bruno would never stop hating the ones responsible for his father's death. The knight was trapped, and so was Bruno.

In that moment Bruno realized the true purpose of his father's request. His father's words were not for his partner, not for Marvin Molehence. The request was for Bruno, a healing if you will; a means for young Bruno to let go of the hate that boils within, the hate that infects and slowly destroys the soul. Bruno went limp. Grief flushed through his entire body, he heaved with great sobs of sadness, and tears washed down his face. He cried, "I love you dad. Oh God, I miss you so much."

Ironically, now more than ever, Bruno needed to hold on to his Navajo warrior ways. Evelyn was still out there. Somehow, his mother had been pulled into this fiasco too. They were defenseless and at the mercy of dangerous men. Bruno needed the ways of the warrior. He needed to free himself, to break out of his cuffs and rescue his mother and Evelyn.

He swung his feet around propping them against the wall behind the toilet. If he pulled sideways against the pipe he would never free himself. The copper pipe would only bend, but it would not break free. He slid the hand cuff up and over the coupling which was connected the copper pipe to the porcelain toilet. The toilet was held in place by two bolts under the floor. The cuff was locked around his left wrist. He adjusted his feet and gripped the handcuff with both hands. Then using his legs to push, he pulled back against the toilet.

The toilet twisted slightly, but refused to give. Bruno breathed deeply, then grunted and pulled anew, there was a slight crackling sound ñ Bruno pulled harder, using all his strength.

Pop. It was loud, loud enough for the Phillip Todd and the other man to hear. One of the floor bolts snapped and the toilet was tipped sideways. Water spilled out from under the toilet. It sped across the floor. Bruno adjusted his feet so that one foot was on the pipe and the other was on the top of the toilet. He pulled with his arms, and pushed as hard as he could against the top of the toilet. Snap. The copper pipe broke away from the toilet. It sounded loud, as if someone had broken a thick plate of china. Water burst from the broken connection. There was a chunk of porcelain toilet still clinging to the pipe, but it was small enough that Bruno could slide the cuff over it and free himself.

Someone was running toward the bathroom. Bruno got to his feet and moved to the door.

Daniel yelled from the main warehouse, "What's going on back there?"

Phillip Todd answered. "Just stay with the girl. I'll take care of this impure punk."

CHAPTER 19

Red watched as Mosi's mother and father left for work. He had no idea where the mother worked. He really didn't care. It was the father he cared about. Mosi's dad worked for Wasserman International.

The Maehat's house had a short driveway that led to a one car garage. The living area was directly above the garage. It was a high skinny home with neighboring houses built so close that they shared outer walls. There was a small lawn in front with a white picket fence. Red walked up to the door. Soon he would be worth millions, living with his step brother Tim, in Chile. He had heard that Chile was always warm, no more of the rainy winters, or the fogged in summers of San Francisco. Red knocked on the door. The light footfalls of the ever-happy Mosi sounded through the door. The front door swung open and Mosi's face turned from happy-go-lucky to damn-there's-Red.

"Good morning, Mosi." Red smiled. "It's your turn to try out The Hunt."

"Hey Red... I... ah... I... I got to go to school."

Red grabbed Mosi by the shirt collar and yanked him out of the entryway. He left the front door ajar, and dragged Mosi to his white rental van. "Guess what, funny boy? You're going to miss school today. What you think of that?"

"Well... ah... actually Red..." Mosi hesitated. Clearly he was thinking about Naydas, how she had gone crazy after playing The Hunt. "Actually, I ah... I have a test today."

"Don't be telling me no damn lies! You ain't got no test today, and even if you did - I don't give a crap!"

Red glared at Mosi, his milky eye beginning to water. "We are going to your daddy's work today. You're going to ask if you can use his boss's computer - the one in the back room. You're going to play The Hunt. And I'm going to watch you, just to make sure you don't try any of your funny-black-boy stunts."

As he pushed Mosi into the van, Red's good eye scanned the neighborhood, searching for any do-gooders who might call the cops. Cars rushed by, but no one looked concerned, so he moved to the driver's side of the van. His milky eye was now watering freely, not a good sign. Red had to hold on. He couldn't allow himself to have another violent outburst. If he was going to pull this off he had to keep cool.

"Okay, Red. But, my dad isn't going to be happy to see me at his work, especially not when I'm supposed to be at school."

Red was silent for some time. He drove Mosi to the Transamerica Pyramid Building in the Financial District. Red double-parked his van Montgomery. He got out and removed the two NO PARKING signs, throwing them into the back of the van. Red climbed back into the driver's seat and parallel parked in the spot the signs had held for him. He leaned over, almost touching his leathery nose to Mosi's. "If you want me to break your damn neck, then just screw this up. I'll snap your father's too"

Red saw the effect he had on Mosi. If Mosi was scared before, now he was horrified.

"I don't get it, Red. I thought your computer game was for us kids, to keep us off the streets, and away from drugs. I thought you wanted to help us. The Hunt made Naydas go crazy. So why do you want me to play it?"

Red didn't say a word. Instead, he got out of the van and walked around to Mosi's door. He opened it, and said, "When we get inside..." Red look behind him, "you will ask for your dad. You will tell him that you have an assignment. It's due today. It's for your English class. You will

ask him if you can use his boss's office. Tell him that you need to work at that computer. His boss never comes in before noon, so it shouldn't be a problem. You're going to play The Hunt. You've been dying to play it, and that's exactly what you're going to do."

"I'm going to be dying?"

Red slapped Mosi on the forehead. "Don't mess with me, funny boy."

Red was starting to feel nervous. If he was caught, it would mean going back to Henshaw, and that was something Red simply would not do. Wasserman International had three security guards, so Red brought a little insurance; just in case. If one of the guards pulled a gun on him, he would be ready.

Red took a deep breath. It wouldn't come to that. He told himself that everything would go smoothly. He would steal the money, and before anyone was the wiser, he would be on a plane to Chile. He had a plan. Everyone would be looking for a big man with a long red ponytail. No one would be looking for someone with a buzz cut who was traveling with his teenage daughter. Yes, Evelyn would come in quite handy. The ticket was never meant for Norman. It was for Evelyn. Red wasn't sure what he would do with Evelyn once he had made his escape. Perhaps he would keep her and put her to work as his personal maid. Red reminded himself, one step at a time. First he must steal the money, and that would require all his concentration. Red took a deep breath to calm himself, then led Mosi across the street to the Pyramid Building. They took the elevator to the twenty-first floor. Wasserman owned the entire floor. The elevator doors opened to a reception area complete with a grand oak desk, a blond receptionist and glass doors that blocked off the rest of the company.

"Can I help you?" The receptionist asked over her desk.

Mosi stepped forward, "Yes, I'm here to see my dad, Mr. Maehat."

The receptionist picked up the phone and dialed. "Mr. Maehat, your son is here." There was a slight pause, then, "I don't know, he just asked if he could see you." She hung up the phone and looked back to Mosi. "He'll be right out."

A skinny black man walked briskly up to the glass doors. He pulled them open asking, "Mosi, what in the world are you doing here? You should be in school son."

Mosi wanted to scream for help. He wanted to tell his father that Red had just smacked him in the head. He had to warn his dad, but he knew he couldn't. Tears pooled in the corners of his eyes.

"What's wrong son?"

Red stepped forward. "Hi Mr. Maehat. I'm Red. I've taken a few of the young kids at your son's school under my wing. I help them steer clear of the gangs. I..."

"Yes, Mosi mentioned something about that. Is Mosi in trouble with one of the gangs?"

"Oh goodness no. Mosi is a wonderful young man. He's going to grow up to be someone you can be very proud of Mr. Maehat. It's just that he is late. He needs a paper completed by 10:00 today, and he hasn't even started it. He called me this morning and said that your computer at home isn't working. Could he use one of the computers here?"

Mr. Maehat smiled. "Is that why you look like the world is about to come crashing down on you son?" He looked at Red again. "Thanks for helping. I would just die if Mosi got caught up with the wrong sort of people." He placed his hand on Red's shoulder. "I'm forever in your debt."

Red gave an alligator smile. "No Mr. Maehat. Trust me. It is me who is in your debt. Can we come in?"

Tears rolled down Mosi's face, but he said nothing. He knew what Red would do. Red would break his neck. He would kill his father too.

Mr. Maehat put his arm around Mosi. "It's okay son. You'll get that paper done. You always do. And, you'll do great. I'm sure you'll get an 'A'."

Mosi loved his father. His father was a great man; a man who had worked hard to provide for his family. But in a battle against Red - there was no contest. His father would lose, and lose badly. However, there was someone who could win the battle.

Percy was one of Wasserman's security guards. He wasn't as tall as Red, but he was all muscles. Where Red was just mean, a man who threw his violence about wildly with no self-control, Percy was a trained guard. Percy had spent seven years in the Marines. He had been in hand-to-hand combat.

Mosi would play along with Red. He would wait until he was close to Percy. Then he would scream bloody murder. Percy would see that Red was evil. He would throw him to the ground. Maybe he would even beat Red a little. Mosi liked the thought of Percy beating on Red. They all walked toward Mr. Johnson's office. That was where Percy stood watch. Mosi still didn't understand why Wasserman needed Security guards, but then again this was their corporate office, maybe it was to protect the owners of the company. Whatever the reason Mosi didn't care; he was just happy that Percy was there so he could spring his trap.

Red chimed in as if they had rehearsed what they would say. "Don't worry, Mr. Maehat. That's why I'm here. I can help Mosi while you do your work, and then I'll take him back to school. He won't miss a minute of class. You have my word."

"Can I use Mr. Johnson's computer, dad? Mr. Cornet wants it done on computer. He wants us to burn our answers on this disc." Mosi held up The Hunt's disc.

Mosi felt bad about lying to his father. He never lied to his father. But he felt even worse at the fact that he had brought Red to his father's work. He felt tears creeping to the forefront of his eyes, and did his best to push them back, but it was no use. A sole tear rolled down Mosi's face.

Mr. Maehat saw the tear. He must have thought that Mosi was worried about his grade, because he smiled and put his arm around Mosi. He pulled him close and together they lead Red to the back of the building. He stopped in front of Mr. Johnson's office and said, "I don't think Ted would mind. Besides, both Matt's and my computer are down. You remember Matt, right Mosi?" He looked at Red but kept speaking to his son. He's the bald guy we had to dinner last Wednesday night. Anyway, both our computers got a virus last night. You can't use either of those." He opened the door and said, "Don't worry son. You'll do great on this assignment."

Red smiled.

Mosi grinned sheepishly. His plan was working. Now all he had to do was scream for Percy. Percy was always standing in the back inspecting every inch of his surroundings with the scrutiny of a Doberman pincher. Percy was the quintessential watchdog, but now that watchdog was nowhere to be found.

Mr. Johnson's office was small but it was secluded. Mr. Maehat ushered Red and Mosi in. Behind Ted Johnson's desk was a large picture window overlooking the San Francisco Bay. The water was choppy with caps and there was a chilly fog sliding in from the ocean.

Mr. Maehat sat in front of the computer and logged on. He stood up looking at his boy in a manner that suggested he might want to give him a hug, but simply said, "I better get back to work. I got to find our tech guy and get him to fix my computer or it will be a wasted day."

Red's leathered face creased with a big smile. "Good luck with that."

Mr. Maehat walked to the door, giving a last wink of encouragement to his son, and then walked out, leaving Mosi to deal with Red on his own. Red pulled the helmet out from a grocery bag and handed it to Mosi.

"Put this on."

Mosi sat in Mr. Johnson's chair and slid the helmet over his head. Darkness engulfed him, and panic began to rush through him like some electrical current gone wild. He felt as if he might throw up, but was able to keep himself from screaming out loud. If he screamed right now, his father would be the first one through the door. Red would surely kill whomever came in now, so Mosi held himself in check.

He could feel Red moving around in front of him, booting up Mr. Johnson's computer. He was still holding onto the CD, and he thought to hide it. Perhaps that could buy some time and Percy might discover what Red was up to. But just then he felt the disc slide from his hand and he knew that Red had taken it.

Time stretched out before Mosi. It seemed endlessly like the darkness before him; then stinging pain. He felt needles shoot out from the lining of the helmet, penetrating his scalp. Mosi yelped. He jumped and tried to pull back away from the helmet.

Then the prickly sensation was gone. Colors fluttered before him, and images began whirling. Mosi found himself sitting atop a great white stallion. Mosi felt strong and proud, but more importantly, for the first time in his life he was fearless. He knew his name was Mosi; yet he couldn't remember anything else. He tried to remember how he had gotten here.

Everything came back to him in a flash. He was Knight Mosi, the king's best knight; the one the king trusted more than any other. He knew that upon the battle field no one was his equal.

He sat on his stallion, perched upon a high cliff overlooking the ocean. The stud's wispy mane blew in a strong sea breeze. Long strands of hair snapped back and forth with gusts of wind that seemed to grow stronger by the second. The knight looked below him to see white-capped waves crashing against the rocky cliff below. The smell of the salty seawater drifted up and filled his nostrils. His stud whinnied and then pranced further up the bluff toward his king's castle.

It was a grand castle built on the edge of a high ridge that overlooked the ocean. High turrets towered over the stonewalls below. The base of the castle seemed to be one with the rocky cliff, granite rock melding into stone and mortar. The castle was huge, covering the expanse of the cliff's peak. And above was a crystal clear sky.

Mosi sat atop his mount fully clad in knight's armor. He held a large battle-axe in his right hand and a shield with the insignia of a lion standing on its hind legs slashing at some unseen foe in his other. It was ironic, his king admired the power of the lion; yet that was exactly what he had sent his knight out to destroy. The lion had been terrorizing a neighboring village, so the king had sent his best knight to destroy it. That lion now lay before the knight, its lifeless body draped over his stallion.

A turbulent mountain stream flowed down from a peak thirty miles away, churning as it eroded the land, carving out a deep gully that twisted and curved its way to the sea. As Mosi approached the castle a drawbridge lowered, spanning a chasm that dropped several hundred feet to a rocky inlet where the ocean waters met the mountain stream. His mount's hooves echoed upon the drawbridge, reverberating down to the rocks below and back up again. Mosi twisted his fingers around the lion's mane. Three other knights had ventured out and lost their lives to this beast. It was a cunning foe. Mosi had to track it for days before he finally found and killed it. It'd been waiting for him behind a clump of thick bushes, just waiting for the right moment to pounce. But Mosi had been too well trained for this beast. He would not be a tasty meal like the knights that had come before him.

The knight entered through the castle gates and a crowd gathered around him cheering his victory. The hoard surrounded his stallion, desperate to be near the great knight, their fearless protector.

The king came forward and the crowd parted in his wake; the tall form of the queen walking by his side. She had ebony skin and soft eyes that seemed to say 'thank you' to the knight. But it was the young princess who held Mosi's gaze.

Princess Gianni was everything that a princess should be. She was beautiful with rich black skin and dark eyes. The knight that was Mosi often found himself staring at her. But it wasn't just her beauty that Mosi was drawn to. It was her leadership. On countless occasions when her father was gone she exhibited great wisdom, solving disputes that arose between her people. She wore a beautiful green hooded cape made of the finest silk that hid short curly hair. She looked up at the knight with mysterious eyes that seemed to hold him in an iron grip. The knight felt his heart racing as swiftly as when he had battled the lion.

Knight Mosi felt giddy under her gaze. He had defeated the lion that had killed so many villagers. Now he had gotten the attention of Princess Gianni. He sat back on his stud reveling in the glory that was his.

A dark shadow fell over the crowd. It circled twice before anyone noticed. When the knight looked up he saw the huge winged form of a dragon floating overhead. It circled three more times, simply watching the crowd below, then landed upon the castle turret high above. Its voice boomed like thunder.

"I am hungry for Knight. Some of my cousins like to eat their knights rare, but me - I like mine burnt. I belch out a cooking of flame that bakes the knight within its suit of tin. The knight's armor acts like an oven. I set my flame to about one thousand degrees. That cooks 'em up real quickly for me, and then it's dinnertime. I crunch right through the armor to the crispy meat inside."

Drool was rolling freely from the beast's jaw. Then it lunged forward with its head spitting out a storm of flame.

The knight jumped from his horse to protect his princess. He held his shield before her, the flames ricocheting off the metal. The crowd scattered in a desperate frenzy to escape the incinerating flames. The people closest to the knight caught fire, and if not for the quick response of the villagers within the crowd they might have burned to death. Everyone ran, pulling their neighbors, hitting at their clothes, and rolling them on the ground. They raced for the safety of their homes. When the dragon stopped to take another breath of air the knight pushed Princess Gianni to the king, who quickly ushered her away.

The knight remounted his steed, ready to do battle.

The dragon dove toward the royal family. They raced toward the castle where the flames could not penetrate. The beast screamed through the air. The crowd was still running for safety, stumbling and tripping over one another.

The knight that was Mosi had been certain that the dragon wanted him. That was why he had pushed Princess Gianni to her father. But now he could see that he had been mistaken. The dragon was nearing the princess, and the knight was now separated from the royal family. He gripped his reins and spurred his mount, racing toward the princess. But he was too late.

The dragon moved in an effortless dipping arc, and plucked Princess Gianni from her father's arms. He soared up and over the castle wall.

"Catch me if you can, foolish knight."

Mosi spun his steed about and headed out of the castle grounds. He shouted back to the king, "I'll return by nightfall with your daughter."

The knight crossed the drawbridge, his horse's hooves ringing against the wooden planks.

CHAPTER 20

The door to Mr. Johnson's office opened and the skinny form of Mr. Maehat entered the room. Red was up in an instant. He covered the distance between himself and Mr. Maehat. Before Mosi's father knew what hit him Red had locked his bone thins fingers about his neck and squeezed. He had unbelievable strength.

At first Mr. Maehat stood dumbfounded, looking into Red's milky eye. He couldn't understand why this man was attacking him. Wasn't he Mosi's new friend, the man who was keeping his son safe from all the gangs of the city? Then, all Mr. Maehat knew was that he desperately needed air. He tried to pull the big man's hands from around his neck, but it was no use. The grip was iron. Mr. Maehat's world began to spin; then his knees gave way. He felt himself slipping to the floor, and found it difficult to focus his eyes. Everything was blurry now. The big man, Mr. Maehat thought he remembered that his name was Red, was quite blurry now. Then everything went black.

Red quietly pushed the office door shut with his foot and moved to the closet. He whispered into Mr. Maehat's ear, "When you wake up you are going to have one hell of a headache."

He chuckled and opened the closet door. It was small but Mr. Maehat was skinny. Red would make him fit. He tied and gagged Mosi's father, and closed him away within the closet. Red returned to Mosi's side and sat watching the funny boy's body convulsed, twisting upon himself as he worked his way through The Hunt.

CHAPTER 21

Within The Hunt, the knight that was Mosi chased the dragon. The beast seemed to enjoy being pursued. He flew high, leading the knight far from the castle. Then the dragon dropped abruptly, flying so close the ground that the knight thought he would surely crash. One of the beast's wings stopped flapping. Perhaps it was injured, but how?

The knight spurred his mount forth hoping to end this ordeal quickly. The dragon crashed into the rocky mountain hillside. It called back to the knight, "My wing, I can't fly. Looks like I'll have to fight you now."

The knight drew his battle-axe. He readied himself for battle. But the dragon was faking its injury. It popped up and into the air.

"Look at that. I can fly. It's a miracle. I can fly." The dragon flew a hundred yards and then its other wing suddenly stopped flapping. Once again it crashed to the ground.

It hissed loudly, "My other wing. Oh, the pain."

Once again, as soon as the knight approached, the dragon popped up, flying out of the knight's reach. The dragon was playing with the knight, but Mosi was worried about his princess. Both times that the dragon had crashed, he had watched her body get thrown about wildly. Surely she would be tattered and broken by the time he caught this insane dragon.

The dragon was frustrating. The knight wanted to battle this crazed creature, yet all the beast seemed to care about was teasing and tormenting, never battling, only bantering and mocking. The knight wondered if all dragons were mad, or just this one.

Almost as if he heard the knight's wish, the dragon landed. It tossed Princess Gianni to the side. She lay draped across the rocky ground. The dragon crouched low. It was ready to pounce.

The knight adjusted himself upon his mount. He held his battle-axe high. His spurs dug into his steed. The stud lunged forward, racing toward the dragon. The beast reared up upon its hind legs. It was going to spit fire. The knight swung his battle-axe before the beast could shoot its fire. He sliced at its midsection.

The dragon sucked in his belly and the razor sharp blade just missed. The beast's head snapped forward. Mosi leaned back, letting go of the reins and rolling backward off his mount. Teeth crashed together, and the knight landed with a thud. He lunged forward, swinging his battle-axe a second time.

This time the dragon was not so quick. The axe sliced through the scales on his neck. A thin trickle of blood oozed forth. But it was just a nick. The dragon laughed mockingly. With a speed that belied his great size, the dragon's front talon shot forth. It gripped the knight about his waist.

Squeezing tightly, the dragon raised him up into the air until the knight was in front of his face. The dragon hissed, 'Dinner time!' It sucked in a great breath of air. His face moved ever closer to the knight's. His mouth opened and Mosi looked inside. Flames began to spark in the back of his throat. They grew, twisting and rolling upon one another as they tumbled forth.

The firestorm struck. The knight felt intense pain. In a matter of moments he would be incinerated, burned alive. Soon the dragon would feed upon him.

The knight that was Mosi Maehat screamed in pain and fear.

CHAPTER 22

Mosi sat at Mr. Johnson's oak desk. He had lost all recognition of where he was or who he had been before he entered The Hunt. He was the proud knight of King Gailan, the protector of Princess Gianni, but he had failed. Now he was about to die. Mosi's scream echoed within his helmet.

Deep within his mind, Mosi believed that the dragon had killed him. He slumped down within the chair, slipping into unconsciousness. Had he not been so young with so healthy a heart, Mosi might have died right there on the spot, but instead he slipped into a peaceful sleep, lying in a realm of his own, finally safe from the horrors of The Hunt.

Red knew the battle was over. He pulled out his cell phone and called Norman. The phone rang just once before Norman Fitzwald picked it up. He was breathing hard, almost as if he were having an asthma attack. For a moment Red was concerned, not for Norman, he meant to kill him once he had the money. Red was worried that Norman might have a heart attack, or simply lose his mind before they could steal their money. But then Red heard a sudden gasp of air. Norman took a gulp of what Red was sure was another can of Jolt Cola. Finally he heard the words he'd been waiting for.

"We're in Red. We're in."

"How much can we get?"

Norman said nothing. He was breathing heavily, almost hyperventilating. Then he took another deep breath. "Hold on. I'm transferring the money now." There was a long silence, and then Norman's voice crackled. "We're millionaires. I transferred \$27,452,188.00 into our account."

"I can't hear you. You're breathing too damn much. What did you say?"

"We have \$27,452,188.00. I just transferred it into our Copiapo account in Chile. And I got three tickets I'm..."

"Shut up, you idiot. Don't say another word. I'm on a cell phone. Wait a minute. Why do you have three tickets?"

"Well Red, I would like to bring Betty with us."

Red wanted to laugh. Norman Fitzwald had no idea what was about to befall him. Red had no intention of bringing Norman or his imaginary girlfriend to Copiapo. No, Red had another plan for Norman.

For some time now Red had been setting up the demise of Norman Fitzwald. He had planted the seed in Daniel Pfeiffer's mind about a year ago. Red always knew that he would need to get rid of Norman and Daniel Pfeiffer was going to be his executioner. Daniel raised pit bulls. It was how he made his living. Every Friday and Saturday night Daniel would host dogfights in his warehouse just off the Embarcadero. People brought their dogs from all over the country, and they paid a pretty price just to enter them into the ring. Of course it was not really a ring, it was a square pit with concrete on all four sides and one metal ladder going down into it. The pit had been dug out in the 1920s during the days of prohibition to hide alcohol. But now it was a death pit, a pit where the owners would drop their dogs in hopes of winning big. Many of the dogs were injured or killed.

Daniel had fifteen dogs. He lived just above the warehouse in a small apartment that overlooked San Francisco Bay. He kept his dogs on the lower level where he could quickly choose one for the night's battle. His dogs would go after anything. Daniel himself had to be

Careful, and would only enter their cage if he was wearing thick gloves. Daniel's dogs won most every match they entered, so that now only the highest betting dog fighters could fight his dogs. In all his years of dog fighting he only lost five dogs in the ring. Most other dog fighters had to put down twice as many dogs.

Red grinned at the thought of Daniel's dogs attacking Norman. He imagined the fearful computer nerd being shoved into the pit. Red had convinced Daniel that Norman Fitzwald was one of those animal rights activists who thought gambling on dogfights was immoral. Red had told Daniel that Norman was planning on turning him and his dogs into the Humane Society. Daniel had wanted to take care of Norman right then and there, before he lost any of his precious fighting dogs. But Red had convinced him to wait. Red explained that Norman was off-limits for the time being. He assured Daniel that he would personally see to it that Norman did not make any reports to the Humane Society. Once Red was done with Norman, Daniel could turn his dogs loose on him.

"Of course you can bring Betty, Red lied. "Now sit tight. And don't talk to anyone! I'll be there to pick up you and Betty in no time."

Red slapped his phone shut. He looked down at Mosi. The boy's head lolled over to one side. Red reached over and disconnected The Hunt. The needles pulled back from Mosi's scalp, retracting into the helmet. Red placed the helmet along with The Hunt's disc into the brown paper bag. Mosi was out cold, but Red pulled him to his feet and held him under his arm, so to a casual glance it looked as if Mosi was walking on his own. Red put his lips close to the unconscious boy's ear. "Damn good job Mosi! But now it's time to go."

Red carried Mosi to the door. His feet dragged like some marionette, gliding across the oak floor to exit stage right. Red opened Mr. Johnson's office door and froze.

Percy Landfern, Wasserman's security guard, stood there with his knuckle raised as if to knock on the door. "I was looking for your father. Have you seen him?"

Mosi did not respond.

Percy leaned in to get a closer look. "Are you okay, Mosi?"

Red said, "The boy got a terrible shock from one of the computer wires. Mr. Maehat asked me to come get you." Red turned his back to Percy. "Mr. Maehat, did you find that wire? Your guard is here. Do you want him to call an electrician?"

Percy stepped into the office. Red closed the door, and dropped Mosi to the floor. His fist flew into the back of Percy's head. But the guard was well trained. As the knuckles of Red's fist touched Percy, he dipped his head forward rolling with the force of the blow and twisting to the side. His hand moved in a fluid motion, pulling free his pistol and aiming it at Red. The gun centered on Red's chest. "Freeze!"

Red reacted with inhuman speed. He swung the grocery bag holding The Hunt. The helmet at Percy square in the face smashing into the guard's nose and breaking it. The grocery bag tore open and its contents spilled across the floor.

Percy looked at the ground. Something black was spinning across the floor. He screamed, "Bomb!"

Wealthy companies were always in danger of some nut-job who might want to blow them to the ground, so it was standard procedure to train all guards in case of a bomb threat.

Percy ignored the big man and went after the shiny black object. All of the closets were made of hard oak, and although the closet wouldn't totally contain the blast it might lessen the effects. The guard wrapped his arms around it and raced for the closet door. He yanked the door open.

Mr. Maehat was lying on his back; his hands and feet tied together like some rodeo calf. The closet was small and Mr. Maehat was gagged, but his eyes screamed with fear. Percy froze.

The muscle-bound guard must have suddenly remembered the big man with the crimson hair, because he spun around still clutching the bomb close. But it was too late.

Percy Landfern had dropped his gun in the confusion, and now Red was wielding it toward him in a dreadful arc that found its mark on Percy's left temple. The big guard went down with a thud.

Red laughed as he dragged Percy to the closet. "That idiot thought I was holding a bomb. Oh Mr. Maehat looks like you're going to have some company. Better make some room in there."

Red shoved Percy's gun under his belt. Things couldn't have work out better. Red was glowing. He was a millionaire. He bent down rolling Percy's unconscious body into the small closet.

"Damn, you are one heavy bomb-chaser."

There was little enough room for Mr. Maehat, let alone the wall of a man that Red was attempting to roll into the closet. Percy's shoulder rolled up against Mr. Maehat's cheek. Red tried to close the door, but the big guard's body was in the way. Red dropped to the floor placing his back against the door and began kicking and pushing against the floor. Bit by bit the door squeezed shut. Red called through the door to Mr. Maehat, "No sleeping on the job now. And don't you worry about your boy here; I'll take good care of him."

Mosi was lying in the center of the room. His eyes were open now, but they were glazed over and transfixed upon the ceiling in a catatonic manner. His mouth opened as if he intended to scream for help, but no sound escaped his dark lips. Red grabbed the helmet. He wrapped what was left of the paper bag around it and tucked it under his left arm. Then he grabbed Mosi by the back of his neck pulling him to his feet and leading him to the door. He let go just long enough to open the door then marionette-ed Mosi through its threshold, closing his father away behind them.

Several people were standing in the main lobby, but no one seemed to have heard anything. Red was thankful for the high quality oak doors of the Transamerica Pyramid Building. He steered Mosi out the glass doors and to the elevator. Time seemed to tick slowly as he waited for the damn thing to climb to Wasserman's floor. The elevator doors open and Red moved in pushing the button marked L for lobby. The elevator bell dinged twice and the doors started to open. Red didn't wait. He squeezed Mosi through and headed for the exit. Once outside, he hurried across the street to his van. He shoved Mosi into the back. The boy's eyes were still transfixed, now on the van's ceiling. Red walked fast, moving to the driver's door and climbing in. He started the engine up and gunned it down Montgomery.

Red had to move quickly now. The other guards at Wasserman would find Mr. Maehat and his security guard. People would be after him. But Red needed to take care of Norman first. Then he would pay a visit to his old girlfriend Connie Cornell. Connie would get him onto the plane. He had dated the United Airlines ticket agent for about two weeks a few years back. It was a short romance, but one that Red was suddenly glad he had had. Connie was a sweet woman with a young child. She couldn't afford to upset Red. Yes, she would do whatever Red told her. She would make sure that Red got on the plane before any police caught up to him. But Red also wanted a little insurance. He needed something just in case the police caught up with him before Connie got him on his plane. He would take Evelyn Rose.

CHAPTER 23

Phillip Todd burst through the door. The toilet was lying on its side in the center of the room. Water sprayed from the copper pipe in the wall. He moved into the room.

Bruno struck. He leaped onto Phillip Todd's back swinging his left arm in an arcing motion and whipping the locked, but free end of the handcuff like a lasso around the white man's neck. Bruno Vic caught the other end of the cuff and pulled. Phillip Todd went into a frenzy. He bucked and twisted, trying to throw Bruno and break free, but Bruno's grip was like iron.

Bruno was the Navajo warrior again. He held him firm. All the years of living without a father welled up within him. In his mind's eye, he saw his mother sitting on the living room floor, crying over a mixture of alcohol and orange juice for a husband that could never return.

"You took my dad, you bastard!"

Bruno pulled back on the handcuffs. The muscles in his arms began to ache, and Bruno flashed back to a time he had had with his father. It was a time when Bruno was quite young, a time when his father spoke to him about choices. In his mind his father was speaking to him once again. His words were soft, so soft that Bruno was uncertain as to whether it was his father's ghost, or Bruno's own mind saying the words. But the message was clear.

"Bruno, this is not a path you are meant to go down. Do not let this man die! You are meant to do good in this world. Know that I love you, and that I am always watching over you and your mother."

Whether it was his own mind, or his father coming back from the grave to advise him one last time did not matter. The words were true to everything his father had strived to teach Bruno. A wave of relief washed over him.

Phillip Todd's body began to sag. Bruno eased off on his grip. He eased Phillip Todd to the floor. The skinhead was unconscious, but Bruno knew he would be awake in a matter of minutes. He had to move quickly. He reached down searching Phillip Todd's pockets for the key to his handcuffs, but it was not on the skinhead. Instead, Bruno found his .357 magnum. Bruno knew he would never use the gun. He couldn't kill another person, not now, not when he had come so close to cleansing his soul. But he could surely use it to scare the daylights out of Daniel. He needed to save his mother and Evelyn Rose. He moved silently into the main warehouse.

CHAPTER 24

Norman Fitzwald was celebrating. He danced with the imaginary form of Betty Rubble. She kept throwing her arms about him, pulling him close and kissing him on his face. Norman couldn't imagine life without Betty. She was his everything.

The door burst open and Red rushed in. He looked happy and Norman was excited to see the big man. After all, Norman had done well. He was the one who developed the virtual-reality game. He had been the one to break the codes within Wasserman's computer. He was the reason that Red was now a millionaire. Surely Red would treat Norman like a king.

Red walked up to Norman and hugged him. He lifted Norman high into the air, as if he were a child, and began shaking him as a father might jovially play with his son. "Norman, we did it."

Norman began to giggle. He felt just like a little boy again.

Red set Norman down. "Time to get the hell out of Dodge. Leave everything just the way it is. Let's go."

"What about the cops?"

"By the time they get here, we'll be long gone."

Red led Norman down the flight of stairs to the garage. He walked swiftly across the expanse of the parked cars to his white van. Norman got in on the passenger side, and looked into the back of the van.

There was a kid back there, a skinny black, kid. He was lying on his side with his hands bound behind his back and a strip of gray duct tape across his mouth. His eyes stared up at the van's white roof. He looked peaceful, yet Norman knew he was not.

Red climbed into the van and started it. He made no indication that he even knew the boy was back there, and drove out of the parking garage. Wheels squealing, Red turned on the Embarcadero and headed for the Cargo District.

Norman squirmed in his seat making room for Betty. The kid in the back unnerved him, but having Betty by his side helped ease anxiety.

Red phoned ahead as he drove. Daniel was waiting at the rolling warehouse door. The streets were narrow in front of the warehouse, and cars were parked all along the street, so Red veered his van up and onto the sidewalk. He left it parked in front of the roll away door and headed into the warehouse, pulling Norman Fitzwald along behind him.

"Well, that's one way to get a parking spot." Daniel laughed. He followed Red into the warehouse. "I thought you said you had another kid with you."

"In the van." Red looked about the warehouse and said, "Where is the girl? I'm in a hurry."

Daniel led Red and Norman into a large room in the back of the warehouse. There were four sets of wood bleachers that formed a square seating arena around a ten by ten foot square pit. Evelyn Rose was sitting next to Mrs. Vizcarra on one of the benches that overlooked this pit area.

Norman recognized the pit immediately. It was one of those pits from way back in the time of the depression during prohibition, a time when any form of alcohol was illegal. But people still needed their booze. They would smuggle their alcohol into these warehouses and hide it in pits like this, then cover the pits with thick boards. The booze was rarely discovered, so bootlegging was a popular business for people who weren't afraid of breaking the law. But as

Norman looked down into the pit a sinking feeling came over him. The bottom of the pit was covered in red stains and the pit had the smell of death.

"You got those tickets, Norman?"

"One for you, one for me, and this one is for Betty. Remember, you said she could come too?"

Red grabbed the tickets and shoved Norman into the pit. The computer nerd pin-wheeled his arms as he fell, hitting the concrete floor hard. For a moment he lay there unable to move, not wanting to believe that Red had just pushed him into this death pit.

Red turned to Daniel. "Here he is. This is Norman Fitzwald, your friendly neighborhood animal right's activist. You can use him for dog food if you like. There's probably enough meat on him to feed your dogs for a week."

Daniel looked down into the pit. "I don't know. My dogs can eat a lot."

Norman was so scared he could barely think. He yelled up at Red. "How could you do this to me? We're partners. I thought I was your friend."

Bruno Vic stepped out from the back hallway. He had left Phillip Todd unconscious on the bathroom floor, and was holding his gun. He pointed it at Red "No one is going to be fed to any dog."

Red jumped onto the bleacher. He grabbed Evelyn Rose with one hand and Mrs. Vizcarra with the other making them into a human shield.

"How good is your aim, Bruno? All I want is to leave here. But now that you pulled that gun on me, I'm going to have to take Evelyn Rose. I'll leave you your mother. Consider it a sign of good faith. Let me go and you'll have your pretty little girlfriend back in no time."

Red did not wait for Bruno's reply. His good eye stared at Bruno while the other wondered aimlessly. He released Mrs. Vizcarra and started backing his way out of the dog-fighting arena and toward the front of the warehouse. Bruno matched him step for step. Red walked through the rolling doors and towards his van parked on the sidewalk.

Daniel Pfeiffer smiled down at Norman. "My dogs are going to love you. I just hope you have enough meat on you to satisfy all of them."

Red made his way to the back of the van. He opened the door whispering in Evelyn Rose's ear. "If you want your boyfriend to see another day, do as I say. I have a gun, but I don't want to use it."

Evelyn faced Bruno, a sad look covering her face as she let Red use her as a shield and back into the van.

Daniel looked at Bruno. He was what his dogs really needed to attack. Not this computer nerd who wouldn't even put up a fight. How would his dogs handle someone with a gun? His mind raced with excitement. If I send two of my dogs after that Vic kid, that would be totally cool. I can just open their pen and give the attack command. They'll go skidding down the hall, racing around the corners and tear into that little punk. Then when the police come, which they are surely going to do, I will just tell them that he was going to rob me. I'll say he started waving his gun at every one and was about to shoot a man and his daughter who were right outside my warehouse, so I let my dogs loose. Daniel giggled. He pulled several two-by-four planks over the dog fighting pit.

Norman yelled, "What are you doing? Don't close me in down here. I'm afraid of the dark."

Daniel covered the pit first with the support beams, and then placed thick pieces of plywood over those until Norman Fitzwald's screams were closed away. He ran to the kennel room and chose two dogs. They were not his best fighting dogs, for Daniel knew that in all

likelihood these dogs would be taken by the police and destroyed. But it would be worth it if he could see his dogs tear into someone holding a gun.

All the dogs were barking wildly. Perhaps they could sense something in their master, something that sent them all into a frenzy of aggression. The dogs jumped up and bit at the wire fencing. A few dogs refused to let go and hung from the fence, their teeth clenched about the wire.

Daniel opened two doors and pointed toward the front of the warehouse. He yelled, "Attack! Attack! Attack!"

The two pit-bulls shot out of their cages in a brown blur, their claws clicking as they tried to dig into the concrete, racing toward their quarry with a ravenous vengeance. They slid around the first corner and Daniel ran after them. He did not want to miss it when their jaws clamped down on the Vic boy's bones.

CHAPTER 25

Marvin Molehence drove his patrol car south on the Embarcadero, headed for the Cargo District. He would do one last run through the ports before he headed back to the station. Marvin had never been the same since Iron Eyes Vizcarra's death. It had been five years before Marvin would even go out on the streets again.

It was almost noon and the big German Shepard kept whining the way he always did when they headed back to the station. It was against the rules, but Marvin liked to have Jake sit up front with him. That way when he opened his door and approached a suspect, he would leave his door ajar. If there were any trouble Jake would nudge the door open and be by his side in a matter of moments.

Marvin always liked seeing the tough guys, the ones who weren't even afraid of the police, turn silly with fear at the sight of Jake with his upper lip pulled back and his big canines showing.

Marvin looked up Brannan Street and saw a white van parked illegally on the sidewalk. Instinct told him something was amiss. He slowed his squad car down to a crawl. The van was a half a block up Brannan, so he turned his squad car and inched forward. Jake seemed to sense something too. He paced back and forth between his master and the passenger door.

A big man with a long red ponytail backed out of a warehouse door toward the parked van. He was holding a teenager in front of him as he made his way to the back of the van. Marvin stopped his squad car. There was something funny about the way the man was backing away from the warehouse. It was as if he was being pursued. Then he saw the boy.

It was Bruno Vic Vizcarra. Bruno was pointing a gun at the big man. Marvin parked his car in the middle of Brannan, and called for back up. He stepped out of the car pulling out his gun, and moved toward the big man. As always Marvin left the door ajar for Jake. He was crouched low, moving to conceal himself behind a blue Pontiac when two pit bulls shot out of the warehouse and lunged at Bruno Vic.

The first dog clamped its teeth around Bruno's forearm, and he dropped his gun to the sidewalk. The second dog went for the boy's throat, but instinct saved the boy. His left arm moved between the pit-bull and his throat. The bull's teeth bore down deep into Bruno's arm. Blood flowed freely. Both dogs went wild with the fresh taste of blood. Marvin wanted to shoot, yet he didn't dare. He was as likely to hit Bruno as one of the dogs. He began to run to Bruno's side. Marvin Molehence would not let his old partner's boy die. As he ran a dark blur shot past him and he knew Jake would get there first.

Jake hit the first dog hard. The pit rolled off of Bruno and down the sidewalk. Jake clamped his teeth down on the back of the bull's neck and held him down with his forepaw. Marvin raced up and shot the dog through its heart. The pit bull stopped struggling, lying still on the concrete.

Jake bounded up and attacked the second pit. The pit bull was enraged with the taste of Bruno's blood. It looked as if Jake's attack would be a repeat of the first, and Marvin readied his gun. But the pit-bull released Bruno and lunged at the Police Shepard.

The two dogs snapped at one another, trying to get biting a grip. They were up on their back legs now, their forepaws striking out. Their heads lashed at one another biting ferociously. In a matter of seconds, both dogs had numerous bites and were bleeding heavily.

Although Jake was almost twice the size of the pit bull, the bull was pure muscle. Its mouth was in a perfect attack position for striking at Jake's throat. Marvin knew that if the pit

got a hold of Jake's throat, it would mean the end of his best friend. Marvin moved to Bruno's side. The boy was weak. His face was covered in claw marks and his arm was badly bitten. One of the dogs bit through the main artery in behind his bicep. Blood was coming out in spurts.

Vivian Vizcarra shot out of the warehouse. She slid to a kneeling position next to her son. "I got Bruno. Get Red!" Vivian pushed down on Bruno's open wound. The spurting pulse of blood slowed to a creeping ooze.

Marvin wondered what she meant by 'get Red'. He positioned himself for a clear shot at the pit. His arm was outstretched. He had a clear shot. His finger pulled against the trigger. Then searing pain; white hot pain flashing within his head. Everything went black. Marvin fell to the sidewalk.

Red backed out of the van. He moved behind the cop and drove his forearm into the back of his head. The cop was unconscious before he hit the sidewalk. Red's reptilian face glared up at Daniel. He was yelling at his dog, cheering him on as if he were in the ring. Red bent down and picked up the cop's gun. He shot the pit-bull in the chest. Daniel dropped to his knees.

The big Shepard turned on Red. It jumped over the pit. Red shot a second time. The police dog dropped to the sidewalk.

"I don't remember telling you to sick your damn dogs on the kid. Now the cops are involved."

The blood drained from Daniel's face. He looked down at his lifeless dogs lying on the sidewalk. "You killed him."

"If I don't make my plane, I'll be back. I'll kill every one of your damn dogs. Now get back in your warehouse and make sure no one finds Norman. You understand me?"

Daniel nodded. He turned and walked back into the warehouse.

Red couldn't help himself. He paused for a moment to say, "Well, Mrs. Vizcarra, that's enough excitement for one day. I'm out of here. I'd like to say I hope your boy comes through all right. But, that would be a lie. I really don't give a damn."

Sirens echoed through the distant buildings. They were several blocks away. Red had just enough time. He hopped into the driver's seat and revved the engine. Evelyn was frozen. She sat in the passenger seat, her pristine face glazed with shock. Red dropped the gear into drive and hit the gas.

CHAPTER 26

Evelyn felt sick. She thought she might throw up. Her stomach was rolling about as if she were riding a rollercoaster. She gripped her mouth and twisted toward the back of the van. Mosi was lying on the floor. He looked peaceful, yet Evelyn saw his blank stare. She knew that he had come to the same fate as Naydas.

Red swung the van down a side alley. He veered around two large dumpsters and slammed on the breaks.

Evelyn's stomach heaved. She tried to open the door, but she wasn't quick enough. Vomit sprayed out through her fingers splattering all over the dashboard and onto the floor. She opened the door and fell out onto the pavement.

Red walked around the van. He stood before her. "Evelyn, I need to get out of San Francisco. My flight leaves in an hour and a half. I need your help."

Puke dripped from Evelyn's hands. "Why would I help you?"

"Because Phillip Todd and his skin head will do whatever I tell them too. They are itching to kill another Indian, and I know what they would like to do to your little Korean friend."

Evelyn whipped her hand on the asphalt. "What do you want?"

"Everyone will be looking for a man with a long red ponytail. They won't be looking for me and my daughter."

"What are you talking about?"

"I want you to shave my head. Make me look like Howard. He's kind of cute, don't you think? Then you and I will go to the airport. You will act like my daughter, and no one will know that it me. Sounds good, doesn't it?"

Red put on a pair of sunglasses so that his dead eye was hidden. "See, you can hardly tell it's me. Just imagine how good I'll look once you shave my head."

"What about your driver's license. You know you have to show that to the attendant before you can board the plane."

Red laughed. "You're a feisty little thing. I got a way around that too."

Connie Cornell. She used to be my girlfriend. How could anyone resist a rugged face like this?" Red stroked his leathery chin. "She works one of the ticket offices. Trust me, she'll get me through."

"Okay, I'll shave your head. I'll make you look just like Howard if that's what you want. I'll even walk you to the plane. Then we're square? You'll leave my friends and me alone."

"Of course I will. But I am going to need a little more. You see, I'm going to need you to come to South America. Once we are out of the country, I promise that I'll send you back to San Francisco. I just need you to hang tough a little longer."

"I can't leave the country."

"Should I call Phillip Todd? I'm sure he'll do Bruno first. He'll have no problem finding Mosi before the cops do. Then it will be Tetsu's turn. He'll probably save Naydas for last. I never like that fat..."

"Okay. I get your point. I'll do whatever you say. Just leave my friend alone."

"Nice."

Red reached into the glove box, grabbed a handful of tissues, and handed them to Evelyn. She whipped her face and hands. "So what's up with The Hunt? It isn't just some stupid test, is it?"

"You're a smart one. A little too prissy for my liking, but you are smart."

"So what does The Hunt really do?"

"It hacks into computers. It unlocks all the codes. I just stole millions from Wasserman."

Red tapped on the side of the van. "Thank you Mosi."

"You know Red, this isn't going to be as easy as you think."

"Who say I thought this was going to be easy."

"I just mean the air port. Getting me through. It won't be easy."

"Why is that?"

Evelyn was concocting her lie as she spoke. "Well, you know the airports. You can't even get past the first checkpoint if you don't have the proper I.D., and even then they have all kinds of security checks. They even make you remove you shoes. I don't have an I.D."

Red listened, his reptilian face taking in every word. "Yeah..."

"So, I'm a minor. I don't even have a driver's license." Here's where Evelyn began to weave her lie. "That's why you need to have a birth certificate when you fly with a minor."

Red appeared to be buying her story so she continued, "It's alright. I have a plan. I just need you promise me that if I help you; if I fly to South America with you, you'll send me back safely and leave my friends and me alone for the rest of our lives. Do you promise?"

"You think you're smarter than me don't you. You may be book smart, but I grew up street smart. You could never pull off a robbery like I just did. That takes a different kind of intelligence."

"Do you promise?"

"What's your plan?"

"Do you promise to leave us alone?"

"Yes. Now what's your plan?"

"When my family was in the Grand Cayman Islands I lost my birth certificate. At first I was really scared. I thought I wouldn't be able to leave the island that my mom and dad would have to go back to the United States and get me a new birth certificate before I could come home. But my dad just laughed. He got on the airport's computer and logged my birth certificate information right into the airlines data base."

Red cocked his head. "They use let him use their computer?"

"Well, that's just it. That was in Grand Cayman. My dad was an important businessman, so the people at the airport let him enter the information into their computer. That's where your virtual reality game comes in."

"How is The Hunt is going to help?"

"You just said, it hanks into computer. All we need to do is get onto one of the airport computers. We can use The Hunt to break into their network." Evelyn was fairly certain that Norman's virtual reality game could not break into the airport's network. But, that was not part of her plan. "Once we break through the airport's firewall, we can look up my birth certificate and print it out."

Red scowled. "I don't like it. I don't know if we even have enough time."

"It's our only chance."

"Connie works for United. If she lets us into the back ticket office, you should be able to play The Hunt on one of the airports computers. You can access the database from there."

"Wait a minute. I can't go in alone. By now you must know that The Hunt makes you lose your mind. Just look at Mosi. He's not himself anymore. But when I went in with Bruno, it was different."

"Listen girly, I've seen what this game can do to the mind, and I have no intensions of dancing with imaginary women."

Evelyn lied once again, "When I was with Bruno, we could both tell the difference between reality and fantasy. That's what made Naydas go mad, and I'm sure that is also what sent Mosi over the edge. But for Bruno and me, it was just a fun game."

"I ain't doing it."

"If I go in alone, I won't be able to remember what I'm supposed to do. I won't be able to break in to the airline's data base."

Red's leathery face tilted to one side.

"It will do us no good if I go into the game alone."

"I don't know."

"It's perfectly safe. We'll be in and out of there in fifteen minutes."

Red didn't say a word. He reached into the van and grabbed a pair of clippers, the virtual reality disc, and both helmets. Evelyn followed as he walked to wooden door and threw his shoulder against it.

The door opened easily under his weight and the two entered the building. It was the back kitchen of some long vacant restaurant. There were two big aluminum sinks and a long counter. Evelyn was certain that the outlets would not have power, but she was wrong. Red walked over to the far wall and plugged in the clippers. The clippers buzzed to life. Red held the clippers up in one hand and his ponytail in the other, indicating that she was to buzz it off.

Evelyn gripped the clippers. She had an impulse to pull back and smash the clippers into Red's the head, then run screaming for the police. But she knew that Red would catch her long before she ever got any help. No. Evelyn would help Red, make him believe that he could trust her, and then she would trap him within The Hunt. She ran the clippers through his long tail. It fell to the floor and Evelyn started at Red's forehead. She ran the clippers again and again until he had nothing higher than a stubble of red hair.

Red was even scarier without his ponytail. Being bald seemed to draw attention to his dead eye, the milky white orb looked out of place. The big man walked over to a mirror at the far side of the kitchen. His face was more reptilian than even. He gave an alligator grin. "This is a damn good look for me."

"I'm glad you like it." Evelyn was nervous again. What if her plan backfired? What if Red noticed the trickery she tried so desperately to hide? Evelyn started to sweat. "How are we going to get to the airport?"

"Don't be stupid, girl." Red walked back and grabbed Evelyn by the arm. "There's a reason I chose Daniel Pfeiffer's warehouse. And, there's a reason that I chose this old restaurant. My stepbrother owns this restaurant, and his car is waiting in the garage."

Red led the way through the kitchen and into a deserted dining room with wooden tables that looked as if they hadn't been used in years. He pulled Evelyn toward the front of the building, turned and went down a short hallway that led to the side garage. There was a 1982, black, convertible Corvette. The Vette looked as if it had had its share of fun. The driver's side had several small dents and scratches, probably from taking corners a little too fast. The passenger side door was caved in from what Evelyn assumed was another car careening into it.

Red moved to the garage's door and opened it so. "Jump in. That door doesn't open anymore."

Evelyn hopped into the Vet. She sat nervously while Red walked to the driver's side and climbed in. The engine roared to a rumbling start vibrating the entire car with its power. Red snapped open his sunglasses and placed them over his eyes, hiding the dead orb. He shifted into reverse and backed out of the garage onto Bluxome Street, then slapped the gear into first and dropped the clutch. The Vette rocketed forward and Evelyn's head was thrown back against the seat as Red raced toward Highway 280.

The drive to the airport was quick. Once they were on the freeway, there were no sirens, no police cars, nobody to help Evelyn escape this madman. Red parked the car in the no parking zone directly outside of the United Terminal.

"Let them tow it. I'll buy a new one."

Evelyn followed Red as he hurried through the San Francisco Airport's entrance and up to the ticketing desk. A long counter ran the length of the wall. A line of people waited to register their tickets. Red walked along the line until he saw Connie Cornell. She looked to be thirty-five years old. She had sandy blonde hair, a slightly tanned face and sad brown eyes.

Red began cutting through the line in order to make his way to the lady. He had cut in front of the first ten or so people before anyone said anything. Then Red stepped in front of a large man wearing a cowboy hat. The man was ever bit as tall as Red. He grabbed Red by the shoulder and pulled him back, spinning him around.

He sounded like a Texas Ranger. "Where the hell do you think you're going?"

Red pulled his glasses down over his nose and gave the Texan a hard look. His normal eye, the brown one seemed to say, 'touch me again and I'll snap your neck and stomp your fat Texan nose to the ground', while the milky white-eye said, 'you're already dead'.

The big cowboy stepped backwards. He seemed to know that Red was more than he could handle. "It's alright. I'm not in that big of a hurry."

Red replaced his glasses, and moved to the counter. No one else tried to stop him. The blonde ticket lady looked a little confused as Red gently pushed her customer out of the way, saying, "This will only take a moment." Then Red removed his glasses once again, this time so that the woman could see his eyes.

Evelyn saw instant and total fear spring forth. The woman seemed unable to speak; her entire jaw went slack.

"It's okay, Connie. I'm in a good mood. Last time you saw me I was mad. How is your little girl? Does she still go to that preschool on the corner of Broadway?"

Connie did not answer. She seemed unable to say anything.

Red said, "My daughter and I are going to need to use your back room to register. I know you have one. It's right back there." Red indicated to a room behind Connie. "We're going to need some privacy. I'm going to want you to get everyone out of there. Wait, no, I am going to want you to stay in there with us. You will not let anyone in until I tell you to. Or do I need to explain all this to your daughter?"

Connie nodded. Her voice was whisper of terror, "There's no one back there now, and no body should be using the room for at least another hour."

"Let's go."

Connie signaled to another ticket agent who was on a break. "Do you mind taking my post for a little while? I need to take care of this customer and his daughter."

Tim Wentworth had started this job exactly two weeks earlier. He loved his job, loved seeing all the crazy people who were traveling to and from cool places. He did not need any breaks. He nodded and stepped up to the ticket counter.

There was a hole in the lower part of the counter so that passengers could slide their baggage through to the conveyer belt that led to a loading area. Connie opened the top of the counter indicating for Red and Evelyn to step through. She led them to the ticket room where she followed them inside, closing the door behind her. Once inside Red moved quickly, emptying the brown paper bag. As he placed the items on the table he said, "She's not really my daughter."

Connie nodded. She seemed to have once again lost her ability to speak.

“When Evelyn and I put these helmets on I will not be able to hear or see anything, so I must be able to trust that you will keep everyone out of this room. Even if it means that you’ll lose your job, the door stays shut. You understand? After all - your daughter’s safety is far more important than this job, isn’t it?”

Connie nodded, and it was clear that she would do whatever Red asked. He turned to Evelyn. “We’re good to go. How does this damn thing work?”

Evelyn pulled up two chairs. The desk was a linoleum-covered board that was attached to the back wall. The computer monitor sat on the desktop while the computer’s hard drive sat just below. Evelyn took the lead wires from Red and plugged both wires into the USB port. She took The Hunt’s disc and slid it into the disc drive, and then she handed one helmet to Red and took the other in her hands. She felt her palms beginning to sweat.

“Yours goes on first.”

Evelyn had rehearsed her plan over and over in her head. She knew exactly what would happen. Red would watch her put her helmet on. She would wrap the straps of the helmet under her chin, but she would be careful not to latch the buckle. That way she would be able to push the helmet up and away from her head just as she felt the needles begin to penetrate her scalp. But, for Red it would be too late. His helmet would be strapped down and he would be locked into the game. Evelyn would stay by his side and watch as he lost his mind. It was cruel, she knew it would change her in a way that scared her, but it was the only way she could know that her and Bruno would be safe.

Red watched as Evelyn pulled the helmet over her head. She gripped the straps and tucked them under her chin. She was certain that she could simply shove the helmet off her head as The Hunt’s program started up. Red had not yet put his helmet on when the computer started to make a whirling sound. The Hunt was about to begin.

She felt the needles penetrate into her scalp, and her mind screamed out, “No! Not yet!” But it was too late The Hunt had begun.

CHAPTER 27

A majestic castle materialized before Evelyn. The castle was high upon a seaside bluff of hard granite rock that overlooked powerful rolling waves. She sat upon a sleek, bay colored mare within a palace courtyard of high stonewalls. She was the princess of this incredible castle. Behind her, on all four corners of the courtyard, round turrets rose high into the air, each one adorned with marble sculptures of gargoyles to ward off evil.

The princess that was Evelyn Rose cantered her bay within a maze of high shrubs covering the courtyard. The shrubs were stunning with purple flowers springing to life everywhere. It was an enticing scene, one that tempted Evelyn to forget about the difficulties of her real life and embrace the fantasy of The Hunt. Yet Evelyn was able to keep a small part of her mind on her plan. It was not too late she could still push the helmet off her head. But she needed to wait until she saw Red.

CHAPTER 28

Red looked over at Evelyn. He was proud of her. She had gone into The Hunt, and come out with her mind unscathed. She was the one who came up with the idea of using The Hunt to get past airport security. Perhaps they could even remain friends once this was all over. Maybe they could even use The Hunt again. After all, you could never have too much money.

The helmet covered her hair and the visor would not let Red look into those stunning green eyes, but Red was certain that she was already working her way through the airport's firewall. She needed him, or she would end up a raving fool like Norman Fitzwald, or maybe she'd end up a zombie like that funny little black boy.

Red suddenly remembered that he had left Mosi in the back of his van. A smile came to his face. He wondered if Mosi would ever regain his sanity. Red was nervous about entering The Hunt. He had seen too many people enter the game and come out damaged, deranged in a way that made Red shiver. Red was scared of very little, but the thought of losing his mind terrified him. He told himself that Evelyn had navigated The Hunt, that she would be in the program with him, and that together they would be safe.

Red placed the helmet upon his head. He pulled the straps tightly about his chin, and then he waited. It didn't take long for the program to recognize that his helmet had been activated. Needles shot out from the inner lining and pierced Red's scalp. He jerked in his chair as the penetrating needles stimulated his sensory nerves. Everything was spinning. It was like being a kid again, laying down on one of those merry-go-rounds, and looking up into the sky as it spun round and round.

CHAPTER 29

Red's head was spinning. He felt dizzy. His world seemed to be turning inside out. A stone fortress materialized before him. It was a castle, a spectacular palace built of solid gray rock and mortar, sitting high upon a rocky cliff that overlooked a turbulent ocean. He was sitting upon a great black steed with heavy hooves that seemed to thunder as he rode into the grand castle. He galloped into the courtyard, realizing that he was a knight, the protector of this realm. He wore a shiny black suit of armor that matched his dark horse. His crimson red ponytail hung out beneath his helmet.

A young princess galloped out of the garden maze. She had long flowing strawberry blonde hair and deep green eyes that reminded him of some far away place. The princess trotted her mare up to him.

Red was happy. The princess was not his daughter, but still the knight felt toward her the way a doting father might feel. He was proud of her. Her eyes were green, so sparkling and delightful to look upon that the knight felt himself smile deep inside. Her face was clean, and soft; as if her skin reflected her inner soul, a soul that was pure and innocent. Red wished that the princess truly was his daughter. He would make sure that only the best suitor would win her hand.

The princess that was Evelyn watched as the dark knight approached. She had an impulse to shove the crown off her head. She wondered why she would do such a thing. She loved her crown. It was a symbol of her status, her station as princess. Yet only a moment ago she had been telling herself over and over, 'don't forget'! 'Push the crown off your head'. 'Don't forget'. 'Push the crown off your head'.

The princess had no idea as to why she would do such a rash thing. Why would she need to get anything off her head? There was a lingering thought; a thought that was so absurd the princess had no idea where it had come from. It was a thought that none of this was real, that it was all only in her imagination, and that she needed to remove her crown in order to be awakened from this dream. The princess raised her hands to her crown. It was a silly thought but perhaps she should give it a try. She felt the cold gold upon her palms and began to lift.

"The day is yours, my princess. What would you like to do?"

The dark knight interrupted her thoughts. The princess paused. He was her father's most trusted protector, a man who feared no one, a man the princess always felt safe around. Yet only a moment ago, just for an instant, she felt something different. The princess felt scared at the sight of the dark knight, as if he were someone to be feared, not the trusted companion she had known since childhood. Her mind searched for the root of her feelings but she could think of no reason to mistrust her dark knight.

The knight lifted his visor, revealing his face. He had leathery skin from years of battle. The princess remembered the day her dark knight had lost his eye. He was defending the king from a renegade lion. Her hands relaxed. She let go her crown and looked into the knight's one good eye. Yes, this was a beautiful day, a perfect day for a ride to the ocean.

"I would like to ride in the surf. Can we go now?"

The knight that was Red smiled. "I'll race you."

The knight pulled hard on the reins and spurred the horse. The black steed shot out from the courtyard. The princess spurred her bay and raced after him.

Once outside the courtyard the castle grounds opened to a sprawling city. The streets were made of small round cobblestone. The buildings closest to the castle were large with perhaps ten rooms and a servant's quarters. Each home had a small courtyard.

They rode in a blur past one home after another until they came to a less affluent part of the city. Here the homes were much smaller. No servants were used in these homes. The streets here were made of hard dirt, and the knight slowed his horse to a trot.

The princess caught up and looked at the knight's toothy grin. Something tickled a far away memory. She tried to remember what it was, but the memory eluded her, so she dismissed it as unimportant and rode on to the outer wall of the castle.

The outer castle wall was made of thick stones that had been cemented together to create a formidable barrier for anyone who might try to breach the city. It was at least fifteen feet high and three feet thick. Four guards stood by the gate. They bowed to the princess.

One of them asked, "Can I tell your father where he might find you, princess?"

"I am going to the ocean. Tell him it would be lovely if he would join me there."

The two trotted out of the gates and down a long path that ran through a rolling meadow. The ocean bluffs were on their left and a thick forest on the right. The princess rode into the meadow, knowing that her father would never come. He was far too busy; always too busy to spend any time with his daughter. Anger rose within her. Why did she always have to come last? Shouldn't she be the most important thing in his life? No. Not the case, not with her father. It did not matter that he was the king. She would rather be one of the unfortunate people from the poorest of families living on the very outskirts of the city. Then her father would not be so busy. Maybe then she would feel what it was like to have a loving father. Something deep within the princess stirred.

Her father never had time for her. But there was someone else. The princess sensed that there was someone who would always make time for her. She could not picture his face, or even remember his name, but she could sense him all the same. It was a deep and trusting love that they shared, a devotion that would be with her for the rest of her life. He was out there; the princess knew it. But where, where was this person that she could feel so clearly?

"Good God, just look at those trees," the knight said, "I have told your father that we need to cut those trees back. They are too close to the castle. Who knows what might be lying in wait within that tangled mess of branches."

The princess looked out at the forest and answered sadly. "My father loves that forest even more than he loves me."

The knight seemed to realize that he had hit a sensitive cord and quickly changed the subject. "It's just over the rise. We shall be at the ocean in ten minutes. Would you care to race?"

"My father can have his forest. I prefer this quiet meadow." The princess sat atop her mount trying to remember the young face that eluded her.

A screeching cry echoed out from the forest, breaking into the princess's thoughts. She pulled back on the reins bringing her bay to an abrupt halt and looked out over the trees. Even before she saw it she knew what she was about to face. Something deep in her memory recalled a terrible red dragon, a creature with a deep loathing for all things in this world. But somehow she had faced this dragon; she had faced him and defeated him. It made no sense to the princess, yet she knew it to be true. The princess pushed back the panic that rose from within. Her instincts told her to turn her mare around and race to the castle wall. She was not far from the gate, perhaps only a mile. But she forced herself to remain. She closed her eyes willing her mind to search out the memory, knowing that that was her only hope for survival.

There was a thunderous explosion of trees and the dragon shot out from the forest. Its wings were beating hard - propelling it through the air with such speed that it appeared as a red blurring movement of scales. The dragon screamed across the horizon, staying low, soaring just over meadow. It raced in a great circle around the knight and princess, riding the landscape like some gigantic roller coaster. He soared up the far bluff and dipped down and out of sight toward the ocean.

An instant later he shot up and over another knoll, racing past the castle then back again toward the knight and princess. The dragon raced toward them, its claws stretching out like great hooks of death.

Princess Evelyn looked over at her knight. He looked excited.

"In all my years, I have never battled a beast that was my equal. This one is."

The dark knight jumped up standing on the back of his steed. He unsheathed his sword and raised it high holding it with both hands above his head. He yelled at the dragon. "Come on. I am not afraid of you. I will send you back to hell where you belong."

Princess Evelyn could see a great rage roiling within her dark knight. It was a rage that seemed to mirror the intense hatred of the dragon.

The dark knight used all his strength. He swung his sword forward, intending to split the dragon's underbelly wide open. But it seemed that the dragon could read his mind. The dragon tipped on its side, banking to the left. The knight cursed in fury. He dropped back into the saddle, grabbed the reins and spurred his steed. The chase was on.

The dragon landed, digging his claws into the dirt and bringing himself to an abrupt stop. The knight was close behind. The beast lashed out with its tail. It meant to split the knight in two.

But this time it was the knight who appeared to read minds. He pulled back on the reins. His steed dug its hooves in. Its hind legs sinking low while its forelegs and chest pushed up. The knight rolled backward. It was as if knight and dragon were one and the same, each knowing the other's thoughts.

The dragon's tail missed the dark knight but it caught his horse, sending it flying across the field. The horse was dead instantly. But the knight survived. He lunged toward the dragon's flank. Once again the beast parried his move perfectly.

The battle waged on; the dark armor gleaming in the sunlight, red scales pulsing with hungry desire as they hacked and slashed at one another. The dark knight dove at the dragon's neck, swinging his sword in a mighty arc. The dragon sidestepped the blow and countered with its forepaws. On and on they battled, each hoping to out maneuver the other, but neither able to do so.

The princess watched, her mind searching for answers. She knew the dragon was linked to some event from her past. But how? Something about the dragon sparked a memory. An image appeared in her mind. It was a boy about her same age. He had dark hair and almond colored skin. His eyes were the eyes of a warrior, calling to her, pleading with her to remember; telling her that it was the only way to escape the insanity.

Insanity... Another image... This time it was a heavy-set black girl. The princess remembered her. Naydas Rascondas.

The dragon moved away from the dark knight. His tail swinging back and forth as he scrambled across the meadow for the princess. Long claws dug into the hard ground ripping into the rocky soil. He snarled, opening his mouth. Flames shot forth churning toward the princess.

The dark knight ran beside the dragon. He dove for his princess. The flames were about to devour her. They licked at her soft face. The knight wrapped his arms about her pulling her to the ground and away from the flames. Sparks danced off his armor.

The dragon roiled in frustration. He followed their movements, sending a torrent of flames after them. Small shrubs ignited and the ground about them was alight with fire. The dragon sucked in a great breath and then spit out another wave of flame. The dark knight stood solid, his back to the dragon, his arms wrapped about the princess.

Fire laced around the knight, shooting past Princess Evelyn's face. She felt intense heat. The dragon shook his head, pushing fiery air out of his lungs. Slowly the firestorm ended. The knight threw his princess behind a bolder and charged. His sword arced behind his back, up over his head, ending in a mighty swing. The sword whistled toward the best's smoking nostrils.

The dragon's mouth snapped forward catching the sword within his fangs. He bit down holding the sword high above the knight, and reach out with his forepaw. He gripped the knight that was Red by the throat and squeezed.

Princess Evelyn closed her eyes. She knew that the only way out of this nightmare was to unlock hidden secrets. She focused on the girl named Naydas, remembering a flickering sense of their friendship.

Memories flooded in upon the princess.

The princess had recently met Naydas. But it was not here, not in her kingdom. It was somewhere else... somewhere that was more...more real. Was this a dream? Was she really someone else altogether? Did she have another life, a life where she was friend with this Naydas? And, who was this dark haired boy with eyes of a warrior? It came to her.

Bruno. His name was Bruno Vic Vizcarra, and he was her boyfriend. She needed to get out of this dream. But how could she escape? The image of Naydas came to her once again. Naydas had been a bully. She was a big girl who liked to push her weight around.

Princess Evelyn's eyes remained closed. New images appeared. The Hunt showed a different vision, Naydas's vision. Within this vision, Naydas was the princess, and true to her persona, even as a princess, Naydas was a bully. A small boy came to her. There was something familiar about him, too. Then the Naydas Princess began to tease the boy, tormenting him.

Princess Evelyn watched the boy turned into a dragon. It was the same dragon that her dark knight was fighting. It was clear to the princess that Naydas Rascondas had been given a taste of her own medicine; a taste of what it was like to be bullied.

A thunder of an explosion erupted before her. The princess opened her eyes. Her dark knight had released his sword, and pulled his hunting knife from its sheath. The dragon still held him firmly by the neck, but the knight seemed unconcerned. He hacked at the dragon's face, trying to destroy its one good eye, but he missed, striking the hard scales of its nose.

The dragon's dead eye looked over to the princess. Even though she knew the eye was sightless, shivers of fear shot down her spine. The dragon's milky eye watered freely, a longing of violent rage that rolled out in the form of salty tears. She needed to focus on the memories, but Evelyn could not pull her thoughts away from the dragon's death glare. She stared transfixed.

The dark knight struck the dragon below its milky orb. The dragon pulled its gaze from Princess Evelyn.

Evelyn closed her eyes desperate to remember the key to the riddle that would free her from this nightmare. She could hear knight and dragon battling on. There were hideous cries of anger, and she felt an urge to open her eyes, but she refused.

Another image formed. This time it was a smiling face of a boy with skin the color of mocha. The princess remembered him instantly as Mosi Maehat. Once again Princess Evelyn watch Mosi's vision.

Within his vision Mosi was a valiant knight. This seemed odd to the princess for she knew that being valiant was one thing that Mosi was not. He was funny, someone she knew she enjoyed being around, but Mosi was not brave.

Like Naydas's vision, the dragon appeared. He attacked, chasing the knight that was Mosi. Mosi Maehat was about to die, so he hid himself. In the real world Mosi had found a comical dream as his escape, and there he remained, lost from himself, deep within his mind, in a blissful place where the dragon could not reach him.

It seemed that these visions had a deeper meaning. Each vision forced those within it to face their greatest fears. Naydas Rascondas's biggest fear were the gangs of San Francisco. That was why she acted so tough. And as for Mosi, his greatest insecurity was his lack of courage.

Evelyn Rose Thompson - that was who she was. She had had the luxurious life, the life of a princess. But her father had taken all that away. Now she lived in the poorest part of the city.

Evelyn opened her eyes. The dark knight and red dragon continued to battle. The dragon's scales seemed to shine with a radiant need. They were pulsing with hatred, glowing brighter every moment. The beast sat up balancing upon his back legs and long tail, opening his mouth to show large white fangs dripping with saliva. The knight moved in slashing at the dragon's belly, but this time he was to slow.

The dragon lunged forward striking the dark knight with its forepaw, ripping into his protective armor. Shiny black armor torn down its center and the knight that was Red looked at his exposed chest. He seemed to know that the battle was over. He tossed his helmet aside letting his long red ponytail flow in the wind and looked into the dragon's milky eye.

Princess Evelyn wondered at the similarity between dragon and knight.

The dragon gulped in a chest full of air, cooked the air deep within his lungs and shot out a burst of flames. The knight that was Red stood there, arms open, head tilted back, waiting for the incinerating flames to engulf him.

Evelyn did not wait to see what would become of the dark knight. She remembered where she was. This was no dream, not some terrible nightmare. She was within a virtual reality game played on a computer in the San Francisco Airport. She was with Red, a man she and her friends had hope would be their salvation from the gangs of their city. But Red was no one's salvation.

Evelyn knew how to escape The Hunt. It was a matter of focusing upon her crown. If she concentrated hard enough, when she pushed the crown off her head within The Hunt, her arms would also move in the real world. She would push the helmet off from her head and be released from the virtual reality game. Princess Evelyn reached up grasping the golden crown. Her fingers felt the allure of gold, but she pushed it up and off her head. The dark knight and red dragon dissolved.

Everything was pitch black. Evelyn's remembered Norman Fitzwald. The last time she saw him he was screaming at the bottom of the dog pit. Norman must have been terrified of the big man. He probably created the dragon in the image of the scariest man he knew - Red.

When Red battled the dragon, he battled himself. Evelyn was no psychiatrist, but she thought it ironic. Red was battling the one person he could never defeat. Now The Hunt was doing what it did best; bearing down upon Red's psyche. It would force him to face his inner hatred.

CHAPTER 30

Evelyn felt disorientated. She was dizzy, but she knew exactly where she was. She was in the ticket office at the San Francisco Airport. The lady standing behind her was named Connie Cornell. The ticket lady looked as if she was in shock, her sad brown eyes open wide with fright. She refused to move even when Evelyn asked her for help. Evelyn placed the helmet on the desktop and moved over to Red.

Connie stared at the back of Red's head. She probably wanted to scream for help, to call the security guard, and have Red arrested. But, Evelyn knew she was so engulfed in fear that she could not move. She had to be terrified at the thought of Red hurting her child.

"He can't hurt you any longer. Watch."

Evelyn moved over to Red's side. The Hunt affected different people in a different manner. For Naydas, The Hunt affected her waking hours, causing her to see visions that were not really there. For Mosi, it sent him to a peaceful daydream, where his eyes were open, but all he saw were happy visions. For Red, The Hunt would drive deep into his unconscious. It would burrow into the hateful thoughts, and evil deeds of his life. It would be too much for his mind to bear, and Red would slip into a coma.

Evelyn lifted the helmet slowly. Red's eye remained fixed; unmoving, and unblinking. Was he still seeing the dragon? Evelyn could not be sure. Red was still for a moment, then his eyelids slid shut closing out the real world.

Evelyn hoped that one day Red would come to terms with the evil he had inflicted upon the world. He was not a good person, and The Hunt would make him face his inner demons. Perhaps if he was healed he could contribute positively to society. After all, the admiration that Red had had for her when she was his princess was real. If Red could learn to feel that same admiration for others he might be able to heal himself. Evelyn had a sense that it would be a long time coming. Until then he would continue to battle the dragon, lying in a deep sleep; a healing comma if you will.

She looked up at Connie. "Let's call the police."

CHAPTER 31

Daniel Pfeiffer's instructions had been clear. As soon as Red left he was to kill Norman and the boy. But now everything would have to change. Daniel's main concern was saving his dogs.

Sirens were screaming. The cops were on their way. Daniel had only a matter of moments, but he did have time. He rushed back into his warehouse, leaving his two dead dogs lying on the concrete. He raced to the back kennel, knowing that he could only save three or four of his dogs. His small motorboat was docked at pier thirty-six. If he hurried he could escape out the back and make his way across the Embarcadero. He would take one dog at a time and lock them within their individual travel kennel. If he tried to bring them all at the same time, the dogs would attack one another and he would save none. He knew that his days of running the dogfights in this warehouse were over. The police would eventually catch him and they would slap a heavy fine on him, but in a year or two Daniel would be able to fight his dogs again. He would have to find a new venue for his dogs to do battle.

Daniel slid to a wobbling halt before Tarmac's cage. Tarmac was his best dog. For a moment, he wished he had sent Tarmac after the boy. Tarmac would have surely killed the police dog. Then it would be a Shepard lying dead, not one of his fighting pits. But even as the thought crossed his mind, Daniel knew it would be no different. The police would surely want the dog responsible for killing their police dog. And that would have been the end of Tarmac.

Daniel slapped a leash on Tarmac and ran out of his warehouse. The dog's nails clicked against the concrete floor. He kept jumping up and nipping at his master. Daniel dodged two cars and a pickup truck as he crossed the Embarcadero to pier thirty-six. He cursed when he got to the loading dock. He only had two travel kennels on his boat. He had given his other three kennels to a fellow dog fighter. Daniel would only be able to save two of his dogs. He ushered Tarmac onto the boat and struggled to get him into the first kennel. It was more difficult than normal, for the dog sensed all the excitement and kept jumping about the boat. He bit Daniel several times and Daniel's arm was now bleeding. Daniel locked Tarmac within his kennel and headed back for the second dog.

Savage was his second best fighter, but he was another male. If Daniel saved Savage he would have to find another suitable female. That would take time and money. Daniel decided to take Agatha. She was almost as mean of any other male, so a mixed pup from Aggie and Tarmac would make a truly deadly dog. He felt a sudden wave of regret rush through him at the thought of leaving Savage.

Phillip Todd stepped into the kennel.

"What the hell is going on? Did he hit me? Did that little son of a...?"

Daniel had no time to waste. He had an instant dislike for Phillip Todd. Two of his dogs were dead, and now he would have to leave six more behind. Daniel didn't even slow. In mid-stride Daniel wound up and punched Phillip Todd square in the face.

Phillip Todd went down in a heap. He sat on the kennel floor and asked, "What the hell was that for?"

Daniel didn't answer. By the time he got Agatha out of her cage tears were flowing down his face. He looked at all the other dogs. They were jumping at their cages, biting and barking as if it were their very last fight and Daniel knew that it was. But this was a battle they would not win. The police would put the lot of them to sleep. Daniel cursed Red, hooking the leash to Aggie's collar.

Agatha seemed to sense his sorrow and recognized it as weakness. She lunged at Daniel, jumping up at his throat. Daniel would have been a dead man had he not spent so many years with these fighting dogs. He snapped her leash forward, pulling Agatha back down to the floor.

He kicked her hard in the ribs "Down! Aggie! You get down!"

At the sound of her master's voice, Agatha seemed to get control of herself. Daniel led her out the back racing across the street to where Tarmac waited. Once both dogs were locked away within their travel kennels, Daniel untied the riggings, climbed to the front of his boat, and started it up. The motor roared to life. Daniel shoved the throttle forward and made his way into the choppy waves of the bay.

Phillip Todd raced to the front of the warehouse. He cursed. "Why didn't I bring Marek. Marek would have snapped that Indian boy's neck like a dried branch."

The sound of sirens echoed through the warehouse.

When he got to the front door it was still rolled up. Phillip Todd ran. "Marek, I'm coming. Gather the skins, we're hunting for Red."

But when Phillip Todd stepped outside the warehouse, he froze. The sight was filled with carnage. Two of Daniel's dogs were lying dead on the concrete. They had both been shot. A police dog was badly hurt. It was shot too, but not fatally. Its whimpering seemed more out of concern for his master than himself. The big Shepard was crawling toward a cop. The cop was on his knees. He held the back of his head, and blood was seeping through his fingertips.

There in the center of all this carnage was Bruno Vic and his mother. The Indian boy was lying on his back. He was bleeding badly and his mother held an open wound on his arm.

Phillip Todd moved over to the Bruno. "I'm going to kill you both. I'd love to do it now, but there's no time."

"You leave my boy alone!"

"It'll be like old times, when me and Marek killed that dirty Indian husband of yours." He looked up the street. "No time right now, but I catch up with you later, you can be sure of that."

Phillip Todd started to move down the sidewalk, but stopped. He turned back on Vivian, swinging his leg forward and kicking her in the stomach.

Vivian wrapped her arms about the Phillip Todd's leg.

Phillip pulled back, trying to free himself, but Mrs. Vizcarra's grip was powerful.

"Marvin, this is the man who killed my husband."

Marvin Molehence came alive at the sound of Mrs. Vizcarra's voice. He moved with vengeance, closing in on Phillip Todd. Redemption was at hand. The man who had killed his partner so many years ago, the man who had destroyed Marvin's career was within his reach. It was time for Marvin to take back his life.

He was on his feet and moving toward Phillip Todd. Marvin wrapped his arm about the man's neck, bringing his knee up and into his side. The man grunted, but Marvin was not done. He kicked the back of Phillip Todd's legs making his knees buckle. Phillip Todd fell. Marvin shoved him face first to the sidewalk and slapped on the cuffs.

"You're under arrest." Marvin leaned back against the skinhead. "You okay, Vivian?"

"More alive than ever."

"How's Bruno?"

"He'll be alright. I'll make sure of that."

Bruno said, "Marvin, my girlfriend. Her name is Evelyn Rose Thompson. A man named Red took her. He's dangerous. I think he's going to kill her."

"We'll get him, Bruno. You hear that? Sounds like the whole departments on its way."

Jake crawled to his master's side. He placed his head on Marvin's lap. Marvin stroked Jake's head. "Good job, big boy. We'll get you to the vet and you'll be back to normal in no time."

"I need to tell you something Marvin. It was my father's dying wish. You know, he loved you like a brother."

Marvin felt his heart ping. "I know."

"My dad never blamed you. He loved you to his last breath. His dying wish for me was to forgive you. I hated you for a long time; blamed everything wrong with my life on you, the run down house that we live in, even my mom's drinking.

But I've learned a lot in the past few days. My dad was right. You did do the best you could. Don't blame yourself any more. I know that his death still plagues you. It's time to forgive yourself."

Tears came to Marvin's eyes. "I don't know if I ever can."

"I forgive you. My mom is back. My life is what I make of it. I plan on making it full. That's how my dad would have wanted it."

Marvin could barely swallow. A lump caught in his throat, but he choked out, "Thanks... I've always been proud of you, Bruno. I hear the rumors. You are truly your father's son."

Seven squad cars came squealing in from the south on Brannan, and another ten from the Embarcadero. They all pulled to a screeching stop before the Marvin, Vivian, Bruno and the dogs. A lady officer grabbed Phillip Todd and took him to the back of her squad Car. Two paramedics took over for Vivian. They put a pressure wrap on Bruno's arm and loaded him onto a gurney. They started hauling him off to Saint Mary's Medical Center. Bruno stopped them, calling, "My Girlfriend... her name is Evelyn Rose Thompson. She needs help. Someone has to help her!"

An officer stepped up to assist the paramedics. "Son, we've got to get you to the hospital. You've lost a lot of blood."

"I don't care! I'm not going anywhere until someone goes after Evelyn!"

"Tell you what Bruno," Marvin was standing above him, "You go to the hospital and I'll put out an APB on Evelyn. We'll find her. You just get yourself to the hospital."

Bruno smile and grabbed his mother's hand. "Thanks Marvin."

The paramedics loaded Bruno into the ambulance. Vivian climbed in and sat by his side.

Vivian called out from the ambulance, "Marvin, there's a man under the floor boards in there. I think it's one of those booze pits from the days of prohibition."

Marvin was like the Molehense of old, giving order and taking charge of the scene. Jake was sent to the vet, and Marvin sent three cops onto the warehouse. The police rescued Norman Fitzwald from the pit, and took him in for questioning. Norman was not one to hold out for the better good. He spilled his guts, telling the police the whole story; from how he first met Red, to how Red concocted the plan to rob Wasserman International. Norman said that his girlfriend, Betty, would be more than happy to testify against Red. He explained how Betty had known right from the start that Red was evil.

The police burst into the ticket office at the San Francisco Airport with their guns drawn. There was no need. Evelyn was holding Connie Cornell's hand. They were both staring at a man sitting with his back to the door.

"This man just robbed Wasserman International. He tried to kidnap me, and he threatened this lady, her name is Connie, isn't that right?"

"Yes, Connie Cornell. That's my name. I have a daughter at Hidden Valley Preschool on Naples. Can someone go get her? I need her."

"We'll get to that soon enough." The first officer answered.

"My boyfriend. He needs your help. He's at a warehouse just off the Embarcadero in the Cargo District. His name is Bruno Vic Vizcarra.

The first officer came to Evelyn's side. "Police are already on the scene. Tell me about this robbery."

Evelyn pointed to at the shaved head. "This is Red. If you run his prints, I'm sure you'll come up with a load of illegal things that he's done. He used a computer game to hack into Wasserman International and steal money. I trapped him in his own game. I don't..."

"You trapped him in a game?"

"Yes. It sounds crazy, but this game is not your ordinary computer game. It can make you go insane. I don't think Red is going to hurt anyone for a long time."

"This boyfriend of yours, is his name Bruno Vizcarra?"

"Yes."

"He was involved in a shoot out at a warehouse in the Cargo District."

"Is Bruno alright?"

"I'll find out. You give your statement to my partner. This might take a minute."

Evelyn started giving her statement. She told about their first meeting with Red, how Red wanted everyone to try out his virtual reality game, how he said it was a test of their loyalty.

The second officer broke in. "Bruno's fine. He's got a bad bite. I guess he was attacked by a couple of pit bulls, but he'll be fine. They're taking him to Saint Mary's."

"Can I go see him?"

"I'll have a unit take you to the hospital as soon as you're done with that statement."

Evelyn hurried through the rest of her story. She told about how The Hunt had needles that went into your head, how it made everyone go crazy.

"Why didn't you go crazy?"

"The first time I had Bruno with me. I think that having him there gave me a link to the real world. The second time I just kept getting flashes of my real life, but I'm certain it was my memories of Bruno that kept me sane."

"We put a call in to your mother. An officer is on the way to get her."

"Can she meet us at the hospital?"

"Sure."

The two officers took Red to Saint Mary's Medical Center, for observation. He was in a coma he would stay in the hospital with a twenty-four hour guard watching him.

Evelyn Rose went with a female officer who had long black hair tied into a tight bun. They were halfway to the hospital when Evelyn remembered Mosi.

"Oh my God, Mosi."

"What's that?"

"Mosi Maehat, he's my friend. Red left him in his van."

Evelyn directed her to the small alley where Red had left the van. They found Mosi lying peacefully in the back of the van. His eyes were still open, seeing some unknown dream. Evelyn crawled in beside him.

"Mosi, I know about the dragon. It's the only way out of this nightmare. Go back Mosi. You must face the dragon."

She waited a moment then said, "The dragon is trying to show you who you really are. Mosi, your gift is your humor. It's what helps those around you. It helps us deal with the hard times in our lives. You're better than the knight of The Hunt. Your humor brings happiness. Your style of heroism is to comfort your friends with laughter, to make us forget all our troubles.

Mosi's eyes slowly came into focus. "Where in the world am I?"

Evelyn smiled. Her green eyes looked down upon Mosi. "Red took us all for a wild ride, Mosi. But everything is going to be all right now. You ready to go home?"

"My dad! Red took me to my dad's work. I think he's hurt!"

The officer had been on the intercom, listening to Evelyn, calling for paramedics, and getting information about the robbery at Wasserman. "Your father is fine. He's at the hospital. Would you like to see him?"

Mosi nodded.

"You're going to have to wait just another minute or two. I got a paramedic unit on the way. They'll take you to the hospital. Once you're checked in, I sure they'll put you in with your father."

The paramedic unit arrived shortly. They took care of Mosi loading him into the ambulance and heading to the hospital. The lady officer looked at Evelyn.

"Are you ready to see that boyfriend of yours?"

"Yes!"

CHAPTER 32

Bruno's room was packed. Vivian was sitting in a chair by his bedside. Mrs. Thompson stood across from her, and Bruno was filling them in on the events of the past few days.

At the sight of her daughter Mrs. Thompson flew across the room. She hugged Evelyn tighter than she could ever remember.

"Oh my God, you could have been killed. Why didn't you come to me? I could have helped you sweetheart."

"Mom... I don't know. It's just... Everything seemed so different after dad left. You... you were consumed with getting back to the Silver Spoon. I didn't think I mattered anymore."

"Oh honey, I'm so sorry. You matter. You matter more than anything else. I don't care where I live, so long my little girl is safe."

"I'm not little mom."

"You'll always be my baby-girl." Angelica Thompson kissed her daughter. "I've been trying to save enough to get us out the Tenderloin, but it's all I can afford right now. I know you hate it here."

"Actually, it's not so bad." Evelyn walked over to Bruno's bedside, grabbed his hand, and looked over at his mother. "It feels like a year since I met you on the street that night." She smiled at Bruno, "When I found out you were Navajo, I called you 'Sitting Boy', because you were sitting in the middle of the street. Why in the world were you doing that anyway?"

"I wanted to scare Peter and Jed."

Evelyn laughed. "Your plan was to scare them by sitting in the middle of the street? I think the extension cord thing worked better."

Mrs. Thompson said, "Extension cord?"

Vivian said, "The next morning I found those cords lying on the porch."

"I guess they didn't want you coming after them." Evelyn leaned forward and kissed Bruno on his forehead. "I was worried about you."

He squeezed her hand tightly. "I was worried about you. How did you get away from Red?"

"I trapped him in The Hunt."

"What?"

Evelyn sat on the edge of Bruno's bed. "You finish your part of the story, and I'll fill you all in at the end."

Bruno started telling their mothers how they ran from the skinhead. When he told about sailing through the air on a telephone wire, and spending half the night in a crushed car at the dump yard before getting a ride to this very hospital from none other than Lawrence Charles Crisp; Angelica chimed in, "I thought there was more to your story. But I was too worried to ask. I just wanted to get you home where you'd be safe."

Bruno finished with how he ripped the toilet from the wall and then got attacked by the pit bulls. Now it was Evelyn's turn. She told them all how she tricked Red into entering virtual reality game, how she figured out that The Hunt made you face your fears. "It tried to make me think about dad." She looked at her mother and tears started to pool in the corner of her eyes. "But I wasn't going to go there. I concentrated on you Bruno." She smiled and a tear rolled down her cheek.

"I think it's time for you and I to go get a cup of coffee." Vivian wrapped her arm through Angelica's and the two headed down to the cafeteria.

Evelyn moved to Bruno. Their eyes locked and it was as if the two were connected; sharing one thought, one emotion, one love. Evelyn laid her head upon Bruno's chest. "How long do you have to stay here?"

"Probably just a few hours, but they may keep me over night. I guess I lost a lot of blood, so they're worried about me."

"Well, I'm staying right here until they release you. And once we get back to school, no more heroics for you, no more risky moves."

"Look whose talking. Besides, you know I'm going to be a cop like my dad."

"Yeah, I know. I just might have to be one too. It's the only way I can make sure you stay out of trouble."

Bruno wrapped his good arm around Evelyn's head and pulled her into his chest. He kissed the top of her head and said, "Sounds good to me."

It was Monday of the next week before Bruno and Evelyn made it back to school. Everyone met on Eddy Street and walk to school that morning. The girls walked ahead with Bruno, Mosi, Tommy, and Howard in the rear.

Evelyn said, "You still seeing the dragon?"

"Not since you told me how to defeat him." Naydas smiled and placed her arm about Evelyn's shoulder.

Tetsu said, "I'm just glad I never had to play that stupid game."

They were heroes, and everyone at school treated them as such. They did have to walk the gauntlet, but it was a walk of honor with students on either side of the hallway treating them like movie stars.

A dark haired boy said, "There's Bruno. Can you believe it? He took on Red, and he won!"

A girl said, "Yeah, but Evelyn was the one who caught him."

"I thought her name was Evelyn Rose?"

"She hates that, just call her Evelyn."

Another girl said, "Oh my God, that's Mosi. Isn't he cute?"

A rather small sixth grade boy with blonde hair stepped in front of Bruno. He looked scared, but he also looked determined. When he spoke his voice cracked with the typical puberty pitch. "I hear that your gang doesn't do drugs. Can I join?"

"I don't have a gang. These are just my friends. But you're welcome to hang out with us."

Mosi leaned in. "Just no dam swearing. And hell isn't a swear word, it's in the Bible."

The boy looked confused, but everyone else; even Howard had to laugh. The gangs of the San Francisco left them alone, and the skinheads disbanded shortly after Phillip Todd was arrested.

When the small gang walked home that day they found a news crew waiting in front of Evelyn's house. Mr. Wasserman was standing beside Mrs. Thompson and he was holding one of those four-foot long checks in his hand. Evelyn was ushered to her doorstep by two policemen while the rest of the gang stood in the crowd. All cameras were on her when Mr. Wasserman began to speak.

"Evelyn Rose Thompson, on behalf of Wasserman International, I would like to thank you for saving my company. We have already given a promotion to Mr. Maehat and Percy Landfern for dedicated service to our company. Now, I would like to present this check to you for \$50,000.00."

A reporter asked, "What are you going to do with the money Evelyn?"

Evelyn thought for a moment, and then she said, "Two weeks ago, I would have used the money to move as far away from Eddy Street as possible." She looked over at Bruno, her 'Sitting

Boy', her Young Indian Chief, her boyfriend, and said, "This is my home. This is where my friends are. We all suffered at the hand of Red, so I will split this money with all of my friends. I would like you all to know that I couldn't have stopped Red without the support of all my friends. Could you guys come up here?"

Cameras flashed and the crowd applauded as Evelyn introduced everyone. "I'd like you to meet Mosi Maehat, Tetsu Wong, Tommy Sanstrom, Naydas Rascondas, and Howard Huxley. But the one person who was always there for me, always putting my safety before his own was Bruno Vic Vizcarra." Evelyn grabbed Bruno and gave him a kiss right on the lips. "I earned that. I've been waiting for a kiss ever since our telephone wire escape. I realized you might never kiss me, so there you go. I gave you our first kiss." She turned back to the cameras. "He's my boyfriend. So girls... eat your hearts out. You can want him, but he's all mine!"

EPILOGUE

Marek Savatski and Phillip Todd Balmy got their day in court. Marek Savatski was charged with eluding a police officer, obstruction of justice, one count of murder, and three counts of attempted murder. Phillip Todd Balmy was charged with eluding a police officer, obstruction of justice, one count of murder, three counts of attempted murder, and kidnapping. It was seven months before they were seen in court, but it was a day of justice for Bruno Vic and his mother. They both testified, but it was Bruno's testimony that sealed their fate. The jury found them guilty on all counts, and the judge sentenced Marek Savatski to 110 years and Phillip Todd Balmy to 135 years in San Quentin Maximum Security State Penitentiary with no chance of parole for the first forty-five years. It would be a long time before either of them were out on the streets again.

Norman Fitzwald sat at his disheveled desk. He was surfing the web, paying back his dept to society. The judge had ordered Norman to return all the money. It was a good deal for Norman. He logged into Red's account at the Copiapo National Bank in Chile and returned all the money that they had stolen. Norman had little use for the money anyway, so it was no great loss to him. The judge also sentenced Norman to two years community service.

Norman Fitzwald searched the web looking for hackers like himself. Once he found one he would send them a virus that would freeze their computer, and then notify the authorities. It was a job that gave Norman tremendous satisfaction. His girlfriend, Betty, stood by his side. She rarely left him now, and he knew she would forever be his companion. He looked down at his ankle, at the bracelet that told the police where he was at all times. He was not allowed to leave his apartment, but then again, Norman liked it that way. The judge had someone bring him his groceries every week. It was like when Red had taken care of him. However, his new caretaker never sent Norman into a fearful vexation.

It was some time before Red woke up from the coma. While at the Saint Mary's Medical Center, Red simply slept. Every now and then he would throw his arm about as if he were trying to lash out at someone. Then on the morning of the fourth day Red came awake with a start. He was still seeing the dragon. It was attacking him, chasing him about the hospital room. Red threw a vase at the dragon. He tackled the nightstand, screaming, "Got you now, you damn ugly beast."

The police tried to calm him, but Red battled on. He ended up hitting his own head, and throwing himself against the wall. It took several police officers to hold him down while two nurses fitted him with a straight jacket.

Red was moved to Prentis Medical Institute for the criminally insane. There were times when he was normal, when he remembered who he was, and the mistakes he had made. At times he was like the dark knight. He felt remorseful for his deeds and compassion for the people he harmed. But at other times, he cursed himself for being foolish enough to enter The Hunt.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



The author, Brian D. McCoy, is unique. He is an author and an educator, who as a youth, struggled with the learning disability of dyslexia. His determination to compete at the university level - NCAA gymnastics - drove him to employ strategies that enabled him to overcome the challenges of dyslexia, and gain his undergraduate degree in communications. After moving to California, Brian attended Sonoma State University, where he obtained his Teaching Credential.

As a teacher, Brian endeavors to ensure that all children succeed. Through his years of teaching, Brian has continued to refine his craft of using strategies that help all children understand the essential concepts to ensure academic success. His strategies have proven effective for students with learning disabilities, and are equally effective for expanding the depth of knowledge for gifted and talented students. In 2006, he was asked to teach a "Fourth & Fifth Grade Gifted & Talented Class" at his school.

Brian is currently working on a series of books entitled: **Strategies that Work**. These books are designed to give a depth of knowledge, making abstract concepts understandable, so children can experience success with the common core educational standards.

Brian lives in Northern California with his wife and two sons. His hobbies include mountain biking and working out in his garage, where he has a set of rings that hang from the rafters. His favorite workout is a gymnastic strength routine done on his rings.

OTHER WORKS BY BRIAN D. MCCOY

[The Teachers' Dungeon](#)

An educational Fantasy Game

ONE LAST THING

If you like this book, please leave a review on Amazon. I would love to hear your thoughts about the characters, the situations that they struggled through, and the feelings you had while reading this novel. As an author, the greatest reward I can receive is from readers like you who share the emotions evoked from reading of one of my stories.

My Brother-In-Law would say, "Don't feed the bear!" referring to the fact that I already get plenty of compliments. I say, "The world needs more compliments, so bring it on. And, if it makes me feel empowered, don't worry; I assure you that I pay it forward every day.

My mission in life and as an educator is to make people feel empowered, self-assured, and happy about who they are in this world! We all have gifts to bestow upon our world. Go forth and do so, and know that you are awesome!

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