

## Chapter Thirty-five

**The** blow up snowman and Santa's sleigh seemed out of place for a sixty-five degree day in San Diego. Kevin didn't have much time to take note of the other yard decorations before Tina came running down the walkway and threw her arms around him. There was an immediate moan and Tina gently twisted out of Kevin's arms.

"A sorry Kevin, but like my chest hurts real bad." Tina stood on her toes, carefully leaned forward and kissed Kevin on the cheek. "Like, did you bring your stuff?"

"Yeah it's in the Range Rover." Kevin pointed toward the street.

"Like, where's your Mercedes sports car?"

"Didn't I tell you? I donated the SL600 to a cancer fundraiser."

"Oh..." Tina was now blank staring toward the street. "Like, you're not planning to drive that SUV van thing all the time, are you?"

"It's a great rig for driving on forest roads so..."

"Hey big guy!" rang out loud enough for most the neighbors to hear. Tom grabbed Kevin's hand and gave it a firm handshake. "Did Tina tell you about her boob job gone wrong? We're not sure if we're going to join the class action lawsuit or hire our own attorney."

"No, we haven't talked about that." Kevin replied.

"Seems that plastic surgeon friend of ours used silicon filled instead of saline filled implants. Come on in and I'll fill you in on what's going on." Tom put his arm over Kevin's shoulder and pushed Kevin toward the porch.

Kevin twisted away from Tom's arm over the shoulder smothering hold and said. "Merry Christmas and Happy New Year."

"And it's going to be one hell of a good new year for us," Tom boasted.

"Why's that?" Kevin asked so to stay off the too much information implant subject.

"Well my team at Hydue Pharmaceutical just got the FDA to approve a new pain killer. Oxycodone is going to put me on the who's who list down here in San Diego. Tom pushed the front door open and then put his hand back on Kevin's shoulder.

"Happy Holidays," Nancy said with a martini in her hand. "Can I get you something to drink?"

"Yeah, sure." Kevin answered in a distracted voice. "Cutty Sark on the rocks."

"Hey big guy, we don't have that rich man's whiskey! But, I have some Crown Royal.

Tom squeezed behind the small bar that four chrome bar stools barely fit in front of. “Hey, have a seat over here. “We can drink to the San Diego Chargers. It looks like they’re going to the Super Bowl.” Tom said as he poured two drinks.

Kevin straddled a stool and noticed several sampler packets of Oxycodone on top of the bar. “I don’t think that the Chargers have a chance in hell.” Kevin picked up one of the foil packets and noticed that two pills had been punched out. “The 49ers would be my bet in the Super Bowl. Steve Young is on fire...”

“Oh you want to make a bet?” Tom asked.

“I’m not that much of a gambler.” Kevin said and set the sampler Oxycodone packet back on the bar.

“Well, if you think that the Niners can do it, why not put your money where your mouth is?” Tom said in the forceful salesman tone that he was known for.

“No, I’m not interested in either team. Since the Rams left LA I don’t really have a team.”

“You place a bet to win money. Bet the spread if you want a certain team to win.”

“I don’t need the money.” Kevin said.

“Hey why don’t we open presents?” Tina suggested from the hallway.

“Sounds okay to me,” Nancy said from the couch.

“I’ll go get my stuff,” Kevin eagerly said and headed for the front door. When he dug in the glove box for the diamond earrings he noticed a callback number on the cell phone display. He hit redial on the cell phone. “CP what’s up?”

“Hey Bro, how’s Christmas Eve going for you?”

“Seems good so far. I’m at Tina’s place and we’re just going to open presents.”

“Sounds cool. Patty said you got Tina some huge diamonds.”

“Yeah, I got them right here in my hand.”

“Cool, hope she likes them.” There was a long uncomfortable pause.

“So is that what you called for; to see how Christmas Eve is going? Kevin asked.

“No, I called because Patty is feeling down and all.”

“About what?”

“She and Lilly were trying to get this hook up thing going for my uncle and aunt and now the whole thing just blew up.”

“What do you mean, blew up?”

“Well the airlines canceled a flight since there’s a snowstorm headed for Portland. Plus Auntie Ruth was flying standby.

“Hey, welcome to traveling during Christmas break. That happened to me a couple of times trying to get home from college.”

“That why I’m calling, Patty said you guys had a private pilot or plane on retainer.” Another uncomfortable pause, then CP continued. “Patty wanted to know how much it would be to fly Aunt Ruth up to Oregon.”

“Why don’t you give Condi a call and tell her it’s okay with me to set up a flight. There’s that small airport in Madras, which is east of the mountains. I think that airport hardly gets snow or ice like Portland.”

“Condi won’t have anything to do with trying to get her Mom and Dad back together.”

“Yeah, I can see that. She’s pretty much done with Richard.”

“Kevin, we’re opening presents!” Tina yelled from the porch.

“CP, I’m down in San Diego or else I’d go by work and get the air taxi number. But being Christmas in all, I doubt that it would do any good anyway.”

“I hear yah Bro. I just told Patty that I’d shoot a call to you.”

“Sorry CP. I hope this doesn’t ruin your Christmas.”

“No, I’ll invite Aunt Ruth over here. Merry Christmas.”

“Merry Christmas to you and your family too.” Kevin pushed the end button on the cell phone.

“Come on Kevin my parents are waiting.” Yelled Tina from halfway down the walk way.

Kevin put the cell phone back in the glove box; grabbed his overnight and garment bag from the back seat.

“Who was that?” Tina asked as Kevin shut the door.

“A guy that helped set up the helicopter logging operation.”

“I thought they didn’t want you working around the helicopter.”

“Yeah, sort of. Let’s go in. Here’s your present.”

Tina looked at the small wrapped box and immediately thought engagement ring. But she had mixed feeling. The SVP at the Red Cross headquarters ask her to go to the Super Bowl and if she was wearing an engagement ring it could be awkward.

“How about another drink when we open presents?” Tom asked when they came through the front door. “You can take your bags down to Tina’s room.”

Tina was showing Nancy the small professionally wrapped box when Kevin came back into the front room. “Go ahead and open it now! Kevin’s back,” Nancy said.

Tina untied the silver ribbon and then unwrapped the silver gift wrap. She held her

breath and lifted the hinged lid; her eyes focused on the diamonds. She felt relief and disappointment at the same time.

Nancy grabbed the jewelry box from Tina's hand. "Oh my God! Look at the size of those rocks."

"A, like thanks." Tina said in a bittersweet tone.

"If you don't like them. You can return them for something else."

"Like, it's just that diamond solitaires' are more for old ladies."

"Watch your mouth young lady. I'd wear these all the time. They show class." Nancy was clutching the box as though the diamond earrings were hers.

"Well let's open the rest of the gifts!" Tom injected into the stale air.

The gift opening was a family ritual where there was a pile made for things to keep and things to take back. Tom's shopping for lingerie paid off, the stuff he bought both women was put onto the keep pile. Tom got the new golf clubs that he had been hinting for the past six months. Tina got Kevin a personalized money clip with matching key holder. The key holder had the Mercedes emblem on it—but Kevin didn't plan to take it back.

After another couple rounds of drinks Tom was hinting that Tina model the new lingerie. Nancy slurred out for the third time that they all should go in the hot tub. Tina even felt uncomfortable with the conversation and grabbed Kevin by the hand. "We're going to bed. Good night."

Tina's room was on the opposite side of the house and she was the only one that had limited the alcohol consumption. Kevin flopped back on the bed and Tina immediately undid his belt and pulled his pants off. If it weren't for the alcohol Kevin would have had second thoughts... But when Tina stripped in front of him he couldn't resist her perfectness.

"You can't feel my boobs!"

"Why, what's the matter with them?"

"My implant could be leaking. The doctor squeezed all over and then drew out blood to check for silicon. Like, they really hurt right now."

"Wow. Your Dad said that he was going to sue that plastic surgeon friend."

"Tom's not my Dad! He's kind of creepy and a bragger. But he's good for my Mom."

Completely unclothed, Tina moved along the side of her bed and opened the drawer on her nightstand. "Like, you'll have to use a condom."

"I thought you took the pill?"

“I was until I went to Ohio. I ran out.” Tina said with her half a made up story. “Just put this on and slide up further on the bed.”

“You’re beautiful...”

“I know...” Tina replied. “You can choke me or slap me but just don’t touch my boobs.”

Those off the wall words, or since being Christmas Eve had Kevin’s mind not where he thought it should be for his first time. Tina was good at satisfying men quickly and efficiently. Kevin wasn’t any different than the men in her past. The only problem was—Kevin wasn’t satisfied. Guilt, sorrow, regret or something made it feel like the worst wet dream he’d ever had. Tina rolled off Kevin and went back out to talk to Nancy.

Christmas morning no one was up yet. Kevin slipped down the hallway and out the front door. It was an overcast dreary morning; Kevin hoped the chirping from the doors on the Range Rover wouldn’t rouse anybody. He got the cell phone out of the glove box and hit the #4 for speed dial.

“Merry Christmas,” rang out from the cell phone.

“Merry Christmas to you CP.” Kevin replied and then looked back over his shoulder at the front door. “CP, could you call me back in one hour and then play along like there is an emergency or something?”

“Hey Bro. I got your back.” Cp answered and then paused. “It’s about eight twenty now, so I’ll call you back at nine twenty.”

“Great, we’ll talk in an hour.” Kevin slipped the phone into his pocket and scurried to the house.

“Hey big guy how was it last night?” Tom’s loud salesman’s voice boomed out from behind the bar. “Can I fix you a Bloody Mary?”

“No thanks but I’d take some Tomato juice on ice.”

“I’m going to be in the Trask league soon. When the FDA signs off on the Oxycodone approval. I stand to make a big chunk of change.”

“Isn’t that pain killer similar to Percocet? I saw that pain killer destroy some good basketball players.”

“Don’t know and don’t care! We spent over three million dollars getting the FDA approval. Now comes our return on investment.”

Tina came down the hallway rubbing at her eyes. Even with her hair messed up and no makeup on Tina turned heads. “Can I fix you a Bloody Mary?” Tom offered.

“No Tom! Like, it’s not even nine.” Tina sat down on the couch and pulled her legs up under herself. Tom was brazenly watching her skimpy nightgown; wondering if

she had bottoms on. “What time did you get up?” Tina asked Kevin.

“Oh, maybe a half hour ago. I might need...” Kevin got interrupted by the sound of a glass breaking in the kitchen.

“Jesus Christ my head hurts!” Nancy yelled out.

Tom picked up the sampler pack of Oxycodone and headed into the kitchen. About fifteen minutes later both Tom and Nancy came into the party room. The conversation went back to who was going to play in the Super Bowl to Christmas dinner at Tony’s Fish House. Tom was hinting that Nancy should model the Christmas Lingerie that he had gotten her. It was easy to see where Tina got her good looks; Nancy looked more like Tina’s sister than her mother. Nancy promised to do some modeling if they all agreed to go hot tubing. Kevin suggested they put off hot tubing until after Christmas dinner and hoped that CP would follow through.

“Well let’s watch some NFL pregame shows” Tom walked toward the big black rear projection television that seemed to take up most of the party room.

“Sounds good to me,” Kevin said with a sigh of relief.

“Let’s figure out what we’re taking back tomorrow,” Tina said to Nancy

“Hey big guy, tomorrow when they’re out shopping we’ll watch some porn on my sixty inch. It’s like being there.” Tom pointed at the overbearing projection TV. “I got surround sound too.”

The bragging and salesman touting continued until Kevin’s cell phone rang. “Hello.”

“Bro, it’s been an hour. I’m ready.” CP quietly said.

“No, I’m glad that you called. It sounds important.” Kevin spoke into the cell phone loudly.

Tom muted the sound on the surround sound system. Nancy and Tina halted their gift sorting ritual.

“Do you think we could put it off for a couple of days?”

“I don’t know what you’re up to Kevin but I think you want me to keep talking for awhile.”

“Yeah, that’s right.” Kevin replied. The back and forth banter went on for about three minutes before Kevin ended the call.

Tina had moved from the pile of presents and sat next to Kevin. “Like, what is the problem?”

“It looks like I have to head up to Oregon.”

“Why?” Tina slugged Kevin’s arm. “Not on Christmas, nothing can be that important.”

“Well they found a girl that we hired as a road flagger up at the helicopter logging

site, dead. She was Native American.”

“Dead, what happened? Did some logs fall on her?” Tom asked.

“No, they found her under a blue tarp. She was shot in the chest and in between the legs. I need to give a statement to the Warm Springs Police.”

“Like, how are you involved?” Tina asked.

“Trask Inc. floated the insurance bond for the C-47 helicopter and that is all I can say. They want me there in less than forty eight hours. I won’t be able to get a flight on Christmas... So I’m going to drive. I’ll go get my stuff.” Kevin got up and headed down the hallway.

Tina followed Kevin out to the curb. “Call me when you find out more about the shooting. Like, those Indians are wild when they do alcohol.”

Kevin didn’t respond, Tina often said things that she was clueless about. “I’ll call you when I head down into to Warm Springs. Cell phones don’t work that good down in the Deschutes river valley.”

“Like, remember me and mom will be shopping all day tomorrow.”

“No problem,” Kevin went to give Tina a hug and she stiffened up. “Sorry I forgot. Good luck at the doctors next week.”

“Thanks. Tom keeps offering me that new pain killer. I might have to try some.”

“I’d be careful with anything that isn’t prescribed by a doctor.”

“Tom says that it is safe.”

Kevin tossed his stuff in the back of the Range Rover. “Have fun shopping tomorrow.”

There was one thing still on Tina’s mind about last night. She felt uncomfortable about asking, but Nancy wanted her to ask. “Like Kevin, do you care if I take the earrings back or sell them to my mom?”

“No Tina I don’t care.” Kevin shut the back lift gate and walked up the passenger side of the SUV opened the door and then the glove box. “Here’s the receipt.”

Tina lifted up on her toes and kissed Kevin. “Sorry you’re going to miss our Christmas dinner at Tony’s”

“Yeah me too!” Kevin lied.

Tina waited until Kevin turned the corner before she looked at the receipt. *Like those earrings cost forty seven hundred dollars. I’m going to have a great day shopping tomorrow.*

When Kevin rounded the corner and was sure Tina couldn’t see him, he pulled over and called CP. “Bro, thanks for calling back and playing along with me. I’ll be at your

townhouse in two hours. Let Mrs. Johnson know that I'm driving her up to Oregon."

"No problem, I'll always have your back. But you got to let me know what's going on. Patty said you were staying at your girlfriends."

"Yeah, it's kind of private."

"Hey Bro, I get it! Sorry for prying."

"Thanks CP. I need to get on the freeway before the thick beach fog rolls in."

"Yeah they're talking rain up here in LA. A big storm is coming up from the south."

"I'll see you in a couple of hours." Kevin tossed the phone onto the passenger seat.

Kevin had just pulled on to Interstate 5 went the cell phone rang. "Hello."

"Hey Bro, I got a problem up here." CP's voice had a teasing tone. "I got three women here telling me that if you don't sit down and have Christmas dinner with us that I can't watch the Cowboys play the Cardinals today."

"That sounds good by me. I'm starved. Who are you cheering for today?"

"The Cowboys of course. Old number 41, Emmitt Smith is going to put a whole lot of hurt on some people today."

"Yeah, he's a real cannonball. Dinner sounds great, I got to go the fog is getting thick."

The normal winter fog pattern would usually be filled in all the way up to Long Beach; fortunately Interstate 5 jogged inland just past San Clemente. *I'm glad to be out of the fog and away from Tom. Poor Tina, her parents are all screwed up! Hopefully this new position at the Red Cross works out and she can escape from the milieu. Tina would be great doing PR stuff. Hopefully she might get to work with Elizabeth Dole.*

CP was watching out the window when Kevin pulled up out front. He met Kevin halfway up the walkway. "Thank God you're here. I'm the only male in there. Tina's Dad had to work the morning shift today. He'll be here later."

"That's right her Dad works in law enforcement."

"Yeah and he's rooting for the Arizona Cardinals just to piss me off. CP said with a frown. "Ted's cool."

All the counters in the small kitchen were filled with food. Grandma was carving the turkey; Ruth and Barbara were setting the table. Patty was talking on the phone. Kevin and CP were sprawled out on the couch watching the pregame show, drinking beer and eating chips. CP had the honor of blessing the food; everyone joined hands. "Thank you God for all that you give to us. Thank you for the gift of your Son on this day and the salvation that he brought for all of mankind. Amen."



*Now this is what Christmas should be*, Kevin thought as he took Turkey off a large platter and passed it on. Ruth had brought her special stuffing and Grandma Kelly made baked apples with pecans, peaches and other chopped up fruits. *This is so much better than having Christmas dinner at a restaurant.*

The women started talking babies and Patty's face glowed when she announced that she and CP were praying for children. Ruth added her two cents worth, "Sister, it takes more than prayer to put a baby in the furnace." Everyone laughed.

Kevin and Ruth got on the road after the wonderful Christmas dinner. The new plan was to be at the guide shop in Zigzag the following day before dark. Patty and Lilly calculations included six hours for sleep. Kevin and Ruth made it to Weed California before they got a motel. Kevin asked for a six AM wakeup call for both rooms. Ruth took the car keys so that she could get her own things. During the ten hour drive north, she had figured out that Kevin didn't get a good night sleep on Christmas Eve. Ruth left Kevin with some word and advice that only a mother could. Kevin thought about her words of wisdom for about thirty seconds before he was sleeping like a rock.

Ruth was waiting in the lobby. "How'd you sleep," she asked.

"I slept great," Kevin answered. "How did you sleep?"

"Not so good. I'm nervous on how this meet up with Rich is going to go."

"Well yesterday you told me, "To not have hope; is to deny all the wonderful possibilities that the future may hold," Kevin quoted to the best of what he remembered.

"I know Kevin, but it's always easier to spout off witty words than to live by them.

"No kidding!" Kevin spotted a coffee pot on the breakfast bar. "I'll get a cup of coffee and then we better head out, like a newborn baby."

Ruth laughed, "I'll have to remember those witty words."

Kevin decided to drive up the Westside of the Cascades mountains. The wet weather front that followed him up from San Diego was already turning to snow on the Siskiyou pass. The speed limit on Interstate 5 was higher than Hwy 97 and they could stop for breakfast in Myrtle Creek. Kevin remembered the spots that had cell phone coverage and called Patty when they got to Salem. Everything was working out—at least that's what Patty thought.

When they pulled into the guide shop parking lot a closed sign was hanging on the front door. Kevin got out and peered through the door window; all the lights were out. Kevin went around the side of the shop and started calling for Tucker—it felt like a ghost town. Outback Kevin went into Kenneth's shop; it was cold and dark. The burlap bags Tucker slept on were gone, so was his water bowl. Coming back around to the front parking lot Kevin had a bad feeling. The gray sky was just starting to

spurt snow. Kevin knew cell phone coverage was sporadic in Zigzag but he tried anyway.

“Kev... Kev-n where are -----“Kevin walked around the parking lot and finally got enough of the conversation asking him to drop Ruth off at the Saxton’s cabin. Patty was almost screaming into her office phone. Condi had been eavesdropping; just like she had warned. ‘Meddling into other people’s lives never works out’.

The sky had turned heavy dark grey and the snow was sticking on the gravel forest road. The Land Rover hunkered down when Kevin put it into 4WD, he crossed the creek and when he pulled into the opening he saw headlights coming toward him. Kenneth pulled to the side and they lowered the window on the Saxton’s work truck.

Mary yelled over from the passenger seat. “Hello Ruth glad to finally meet you!”

“You also Mary,” Ruth yelled over to the worn out pickup truck.

“We had to let Richard in on the surprise.”

“Oh, how did he react?” Ruth yelled back.

“He wants to see you!”

Ruth didn’t respond. The words felt good but it had been almost nine months.

“You’ll best get Mrs. Johnson up there and head back out. We’re going to get dumped on tonight. Richard pointed up and out the side window at the heavy dark grey clouds just above the tall Douglas fir trees.

“Ruth there’s stuff in the ice chest and more food in the metal critter proof box. I hope you can cook on a wood stove.”

“Mary, I grew up in Alabama that’s all we had was a wood burning cook stove.”

“You’d best get moving young man or else these two we’ll be yakking about cooking. Richard took his foot off the gas and eased alongside the Range Rover.

Kevin stopped between the old dead snag and the deck. Richard came out of the A-frame cabin walked across the deck and opened the passenger door. “I have missed you Ruth.”

Ruth slipped out of the passenger seat, they hugged, tears erupted and Kevin thought; *that went better than I expected*. Kevin slipped alongside the driver side and got two suitcases from the back; he walked up the three stairs and sat them in the half inch of snow that had stacked up on the deck.

Richard grabbed his hand and said, “Thanks Kevin. Thanks for all that you did to make this happen.”

“No problem. Glad to do it.” Kevin got back in the Range Rover and drove off.

The lights were on in the guide shop and something just didn’t feel right when

Tucker didn't come running when the bells on the door clanged. Kenneth came down the hallway and stood behind the glass display case. "How'd it all finish up at the cabin? Those two fighting like dogs or acting like love birds?"

"I'd say acting more like love birds."

Kenneth turned and yelled down the hall. "Good work Mary, they're acting like love birds."

"Snow was covering the deck when I pulled away."

"I'm glad I showed Rich how to fire up the old soak tub." Ken said and winked at Kevin.

"Oh Kenneth, you men all think the same way. I didn't even tell Ruth to pack a swimsuit."

"That's a good thing," Kenneth looked over and smiled at Mary.

Mary was behind the display case. "So you think the little rendezvous will work out?"

"I hope so. I've known the Johnson's all my life. They're good people and since Jabbar..." Kevin quit talking, *oops; I forgot the Saxton's lost a son also...* Kevin was feeling even more unsettled than when he came through the front door and Tucker wasn't there.

"Yeah, Rich told me about Jabbar getting killed because one punk ass gang banger wears blue and the other red. Jabbar had on a school jacket that was the wrong color and he wasn't even in a gang. Those punk ass kids need jobs."

"Kevin, you're right about how hard it is for parents when they lose a child." Mary spoke softly.

"Mary, I know about Billy and I'm so sorry." Kevin felt horrible.

"Well, how about some leftovers for dinner. You have to be tired after that long drive up from LA."

"I need to get a motel for tonight. So, I'll have to pass on dinner."

"You ain't going to find a motel tonight. This is Christmas break! The skiers will have everything booked. You can crash in Lilly's bed." Kenneth's offer sounded more like an order.

"I'd rather he sleep in Billy's room." Mary said with some hesitance.

"No not yet Mary, it just doesn't feel right, yet." Kenneth loosely argued. "Besides, Lilly won't be back for three days."

The back and forth discussion went on for almost a few minutes. Kevin wasn't sure if he'd find a room and he had to be at the Warm Springs police department first thing in the morning "How about if I sleep in a sleeping bag in front of the fireplace."

Mary smiled. "That will work. Kenny don't you have an old army cot out in your shop?"

"Yeah, up in the rafters. You want to help me get the sleeping stuff young man?"

"Sure," replied Kevin and followed Ken around back to his shop.

There was a deep not wanting to know but Kevin had to probe. "I noticed the burlap bags are gone." Kevin pointed to a corner over by the big barrel wood burner."

"Yep, I buried Tucker in those burlap bags. He loved laying on them over there by the heat when I tuned up my saws and sharpened chains."

"Oh... What happened? Did Tucker die of old age?"

"No, someone backed over him in the parking lot. I had to put him down."

"What the hell. Why wasn't the person looking back?" Tucker was a big dog.

"Don't know. Mike, the kid at the grocery store across the highway got the plate number but the Animal Control people said it was a rental car. The guy was a little taller than you." Ken handed Kevin a cot and pad. "Sleeping bags are inside the house. You'll want a down bag tonight. It's gonna be cold as a witch's tit tonight."

Kevin smirked. "I never felt a witch's tit."

"Me neither." Ken replied with his own smirk.

Leftover turkey and ham hit the spot. Fried potato garlic pancakes were something Kevin never experienced. He eyeballed the last one but Kenneth's fork claimed it first. That was a good thing, because Ken didn't get the last piece of Mary's apple pie with raisins and walnuts. The scoop of vanilla ice cream on top was worth surrendering the potato pancake for. Kevin flashed Kenneth a devilish grin and rolled his eyes with every bite.

Both Mary and Ken thanked Kevin umpteen times for everything he had done for the Saxton family. They were especially grateful for Lilly going back to Washington DC to testify about the logging and her outdoor guide businesses. An unexpected outcome was the client boom for Lilly; she was booked up through spring for Steelhead and Salmon fishing. She was currently at the mouth of the John Day River for three days guiding a junior congressman from Kansas as they spoke. This was the second trip for the young congressman from Kansas, who was a decorated Army Ranger. Kevin was glad the logging and guide business was doing well.

Early the next morning Kevin was awoken by the sound of Kenneth plowing the snow in the parking lot. Mary handed him a cup of coffee and a towel and pointed him to the bathroom. The bathroom was smaller than most motel bathrooms. The combo shower bathtub valve was hard to adjust, but it felt so good to clean up; Christmas Eve morning was the last time he had showered.

Kenneth was sitting at the small Kitchen table drinking coffee when Kevin came out

of the bathroom. “The highway department just came by with their plows. You shouldn’t have a problem getting to Warm Springs. Just take it easy on the long downgrade.”

“Thanks, I know all about the Warm Springs downgrade.” Kevin set the half full coffee cup on the table. “Thank you both for everything.” Kevin hugged Mary and shook Ken’s hand. Kevin wasn’t one for long goodbyes.

“Here, I refilled your coffee. Take it for the road.” Mary was holding back tears.

“I don’t want to take your promotion cup.”

“It’s okay, Lilly just ordered them in, she’d want you to have one.”

Highway 26 was plowed all the way to where the tall trees ended and the high desert started. There was just a small trace of snow on the downgrade. Kevin sat in front of a small interrogation table and placed the one requested document on the other side of the table. The short heavy set detective came in to the interrogation room. The top button on his white shirt was undone but the dark blue tie held the sweat stained collar somewhat closed.

“That’s a fax of the document you requested. The phone number of the church is on the bottom.” Kevin pointed at the paper.

The detective picked up the fax and did a slow glance over. “Well it looks like you’re no longer a suspect. This baptismal record proves that you were back in Michigan the week Aiana Smith was murdered. The detective slipped the fax into the file folder he was holding. “You’re free to go!”

“Thanks,” Kevin stood up, he towered over the detective. “Do you have any other leads?”

“We found a rifle hidden in the Chinook helicopter and traced it back to an outdoor store in Madras.”

“Is that the murder weapon?”

“No, Aiana was shot by a 38 caliber, probably a revolver; we have searched all over for casing and never found anything. We did find the 223 casing from the varmint rifle that was in the helicopter landing site. Also found some Eagle feathers and blood.

“Do you think there is a connection?” Kevin asked.

“Madras is farming and ranching town of hard working folks that would never use a 223 caliber to shoot varmints; the center fire ammunition cost five times compared to that of a 22 caliber long rifle.”

“So you think there is a connection between the two guns?”

“That’s all that I can tell you Mr. Trask.” The detective opened the door and ushered

Kevin out of the Warm Springs Police Department.

Kevin headed south up the long hill on Highway 26, it felt good to clear up this last item in Central Oregon. In Madras he planned to call Tina and invite her to come up to Pasadena; since his parents were in Florida motor-coaching. He needed to touch base with Condi and Patty to find out when the next land sale meeting with Hung Meng was scheduled.

About two miles from town three bright yellow poster boards were nailed on to three consecutive fence posts. The first sign read: **Aussie Pups**. The second read: **Great cattle or work dog**. The last sign read: **Made in USA. Not Australia.** *I wonder if? No they like Labs. Plus it too soon. Plus...*

Kevin drove into Madras and pulled into a farm store parking lot. The cell phone showed four bars for signal. Kevin dialed and then asked. "Is Tina there?"

"No, some Red Cross official flew her back east for an interview. She might be working with Liddy Dole doing public relations stuff."

"When is she going to be back?" Kevin asked in a taken back tone.

"I think after New Years. Some high ranking Red Cross official said he'd show her around DC."

"Oh..." Kevin was let down. He had planned to bring in the New Year with Tina at the Pasadena Country Club and then back at the Trask home. Okay Tom. Thanks for the update."

"Not a problem big guy. But you'd better learn to take care of the home front if you want it to stay at home." Tom barked out the words like they were written in stone.

"What's that mean?"

"Hey, Kevin women want shit that you don't even know about. I'll send you a book. Maybe you'll figure it out. It won't stay home the way you are. Women like bad boys not prudes."

"Okay Tom. You and Nancy have a good New Years." Kevin abruptly ended the call. *Tom's a dip shit. I'm sure Nancy plays around on him.*

Kevin noticed a sign in the farm store. **Pup's need worming too**. Another sign read: **New Chicks starting at a dollar**. Kevin decided to have lunch at the Black Bear restaurant next door, since now there wasn't a rush to get back home.

The weather channel on the television hanging above the counter was predicating six more inches of snow in the mountains. Kevin started thinking about staying around to ski at one of Oregon's ski resorts. The waitress laid out three options; head north to Mt. Hood Meadows or Timberline lodge or go south to Mt. Bachelor. Kevin had played golf at Sunriver before but never skied there. The waitress also bragged that Mt Bachelor was ranked number one for snowboarding lessons.

Two miles north of Madras Kevin turned west onto a red cinder road. There was an American flag sticker on a self-closing gate. A pole building on the left was about half full with bales of hay stacked twenty feet tall. There was a green and yellow John Deere tractor parked just inside a light blue metal building. About a hundred head of cattle started to trot toward the Range Rover; a second self operating gate opened. The red cinder road wrapped around the blue metal out building to a double wide manufactured home.

Two young boys with cowboy hats came running toward the Range Rover. “Can we help you sir?” the older boy asked.

“I saw the sign about working dogs,” Kevin said and then stepped out.

“Here we’ll show you!” The smaller boy grabbed Kevin’s hand and started to pull him toward the blue metal building.

“Sadie had seven pups,” the older brother yelled as he took the lead position.

They went in around the John Deere and then between a baling machine and a disk plow. There was a heat lamp shining down into a sectioned off part of a stall. Kevin looked over the top and there was six fluff balls playing, sleeping and tumbling over each other.

“You can’t have that one. He’s staying here to be another cattle dog.” The older boy pointed at the biggest pup.

“I like that one!” The smaller boy pointed at a black white and brown pup with one blue eye. “He is handsome!”

“I don’t know if I need a boy?” Kevin said.

“Boys are better,” both boys yelled in unison

A rancher rode into the building on an ATV. “Dad will help you pick out the best work dog,” the older boy spouted off.

“Mike Harper here! How you doing?” The stocky built rancher had the build of a bull rider. “I just put my signs out this morning. You can get the pick of the litter. Females are seven hundred and males are five hundred.”

“I don’t know much about dogs. I was thinking about getting one for a gift.”

“This isn’t going to be a late Christmas present for your kids is it. That’s why I didn’t put my signs out until this morning. These aren’t pups that do good cooped up in a house.”

“No I don’t have kids. It would be for a logging family that lives over in Zigzag. Someone backed over their Labrador; Tucker.”

“That’s my name,” the younger boy yelled out.

"In my opinion the Aussie's are a harder working breed than Lab's. But, as big as the labs get they are better dogs around young children."

"Well, Lilly is the youngest, and she's older than me. By the way I'm Kevin."

"You got a last name?" Mike asked as he pulled off his right work glove.

"Yeah Trask," Kevin shook Mike's bare hand.

"You look familiar," Mike looked hard at Kevin. "You from around here?"

"No!" Kevin turned his head. "What's that whimpering over there?"

"That's the runt. I'm probably going to have to put her down." Mike replied.

"What for?" Kevin asked in stunned words

"She's about half blind and probably about half deaf."

"Is that a reason to kill her?"

"Hey, I'm a rancher. I have to put down yearlings all the time. You start breeding animals with weak genetics and you could ruin a whole line on animals."

"That just doesn't sound right."

"Hey city boy let me show you something." Mike pulled his glove back on.

"How do you know that I'm from the city?"

"The California plates, on a fifty thousand dollar four wheel drive sort of give you up."

Kevin followed Mike over to the cardboard box and then Mike picked up the tiny four pound mixed white brown and black fur ball. See her two blue eyes. That's not a dominant gene trait. See the pink spots on her nose. A dog's nose should go all black by nine weeks. This pup has too many recessive Merle gene markers."

Kevin was silent until Mike put the lone pup back into the small cardboard box. "How do your kids deal with this kind of stuff?"

"Hey look city boy! Ranchers and farmers feed the world. My kids know about the circle of life. They might not like it but they understand it!"

Back at the sectioned off stall the conversation turned more civil and Kevin ended up purchasing a tri colored male with one blue eye with a solid black nose. Mike agreed that Kevin could bring the pup back if it wasn't a good fit.

On the hour drive back to Zigzag the pup whimpered and cried; it was the first pup to be split from the litter. Actually a week ago the runt was the first to be separated out, so not to distress the mother. Kevin was hoping the tri pup would be of the Saxton's liking. The puppy purchase turned out to be more of a city boy standing up to a cowboy than a thought out decision. If Kevin had to return the pup Mike would probably get up in his face about being a city boy.



Kevin's stomach knotted when he went through the front door. The bells hanging from doorknob startled the Aussie pup.

"Be right there! Ken's deep voice and heavy footsteps bellowed from the hallway. "What do you got there?" Ken asked.

Kevin's stomach double knotted he didn't expect Kenneth to be home.

"A... I thought you might like a new dog. And if you don't..."

Ken came around the glass display case and took the pup from Kevin. "Lookie here. It's a baby Aussie." Ken held the pup up and checked the gender. "How old is this little guy?"

"Ten weeks." Kevin swallowed hard.

"Let's go show the little guy to Mary. She's been on the phone for a half hour."

Kevin followed Ken into the kitchen and her eyes almost exploded. "Here take this," she handed the yellow wall phone receiver to Kevin.

"Hello," Kevin said into the yellow handset.

Kevin, I've left three messages on your cell phone. Condi set up a meeting with Hung Meng the day after New Years."

"That sounds great. I was headed for home but got sidetracked." Kevin said and watched Mary get cream from the refrigerator. Ken pulled a piece of jerky from the tattered pocket on his blue flannel shirt and let the puppy start chewing on the end of the strip.

"There's some puppy food in the Range Rover." Kevin spoke directly at Ken.

"What?" Patty said through the phone.

"In a brown paper bag. There's AKC paperwork in an envelope also." Kevin said, yet Ken was hearing him.

"What?" Patty said for the second time.

Mary took the pup from Ken. "Go get this little guy's food Kenneth. That venison jerky is not good for him."

"Patty, I'll be back before the meeting."

"Okay, I'll let Condi know."

"It's getting dark. Can you stay another night? Lilly will be home tomorrow." Mary asked as she poured cream into a saucer

"I'd like to but I need to get back to work for an important meeting." Kevin neglected to say that he wanted to get in two days of skiing at Mt. Bachelor. "If you two are good with the Pup I need to hit the road."

There was another twenty minutes of puppy loving and thanks. It was dark and cold; the headlights on the plowed snow berm helped brighten up highway 26. Kevin scanned the radio station and finally found a ski report. A foot of new snow with two days of sunshine ahead sounded promising. Kevin knew to get a motel in Redmond a small town fifteen miles north of Bend. He'd get a good night sleep and head up to the ski resort mid morning so to avoid the early diehard skiers.

The snow berms were less and Kevin's headlights hit the three yellow posters as he past Mike Harper's ranch. It was past seven and one mercury vapor light on a power pole made a circle of light around the double wide manufactured home. *That Mike was a hard ass but I know where he was coming from. Lots of people get into stuff they shouldn't. Dog breeding or cattle are two things I will never do. To have to kill something just because it's small or weak would suck.*

Madras was dark and closed up. Kevin pulled into the same farm store that he had been at five hours ago and noticed the flashing time and temperature sign on the Madras city bank: 7:25pm 22 degrees Fahrenheit flashed back and forth. It was too late to call Patty or Condi to verify the meeting with Hung Meng. He headed back up the hill and turned on the blinker; the first auto gate opened and closed. When the second gate opened the porch light came on; the silhouette of Mike holding a rifle appeared under the mercury vapor light.

Kevin flashed his off road high beams and Mike put his hand up to block the high intensity blue light. Mike met Kevin when he pulled the Range Rover up to a horse hitching rail.

"What, are you bringing back the pup?" Mike rested the rifle on his shoulder.

Kevin's heart was racing. "I thought you were going to shoot the SUV."

"This 22 varmint gun with bird shot wouldn't even put out those high beams." Mike leaned the rifle against the hitching rail. "Your friends didn't like the Aussie?"

"No they loved the dog. I'm back to buy the runt."

"You don't want her. With her poor hearing and sight she wouldn't last a week in the city. Plus she'll cost you a fortune in vet bills."

"We have a cyclone fence at our business and an on-site security guard. She'll be safe."

"Okay, I'll let you have the runt only if you promise to fix her."

"I'll do whatever I can to keep her healthy."

"I mean to get her neutered."

"Yeah, that too, no problem."

A woman came out the front door; her silhouette showed that she was pregnant.

"Mike is everything okay?"

“Yeah the guy that bought a pup this afternoon is back. I’m sending him to the house.” Mike handed Kevin the rifle and then headed for the outbuilding.

“Here!” Kevin handed the 22 rifle to Mrs. Carter when he came up the porch stairs.

“Let’s go inside it’s freezing out here.”

A woodstove was blazing in a large room that was the front room and eating area combined. There were family pictures and 4H ribbons decorating the walls. A display case that had twenty or more Rodeo belt buckles and a few trophies was next to a small portable television on a stand with a weather station radio underneath. A well tattered bible was on a shelf underneath.

“I’m sorry about coming by so late.”

Not a problem. The boys talked about you at dinner tonight. They liked your SUV. They said it was real fancy blue fog lights on it.

“Yeah, I’m glad I got rid of my other car. It would have been horrible in the snow.”

“We haven’t had that much snow so far this year. Not like last year.”

Their small talk continued until the sound of boots stomping on the front porch was followed by Mike pushing open the front door. He set the box in front of the wood stove. “We’ll let her warm up just for a few minutes.”

“She shouldn’t whimper too badly. Mike separated her from her family two days ago.” Mrs. Harper whispered just in case her boys were still up.

“You said the females were seven hundred,” Kevin whispered back; clued in on the fact of the sleeping boys.

Mike took off his hat and hung it on a rack made out of steer horns. Winter was always a hard time for farmers and ranchers. “I can’t take anything for the runt.” That just wouldn’t be right.”

Kevin walked over toward the box; the area around the wood stove felt like a sauna. The small puppy was curled up in a ball lying on straw. “I need to give you something for her.”

“I know who you are.” Mrs. Harper blurted out louder than a whisper.

*Oh no here it comes,* Kevin thought to himself.

“You’re that new football coach at Warm Springs that played for Duke. You brought along that team chaplain that has a photographic memory. His name was Augustine.”

“He goes by Gus,” Kevin replied.

“Anyway, that Mr. Gus told those boys to believe in themselves and to trust in God.”

“That would be Gus.” Kevin replied.

“Well, that big slow kid that picked up the fumble and then lumbered into the end zone. That was my nephew.” Mrs. Harper said proudly. If it wasn’t for the believe in yourself coaching, Jake would have just fell on the football.”

“I remember Jake, he’s a big kid; he carried a couple of players into the end zone.”

“That one play changed Jake’s whole life,” Mike said with sincerity and respect.

There was some noise and commotion down the hall.

“I’d better get going. I’d like to get to Redmond before nine.” Kevin picked up the box and Mike opened the door.

“Hey Mister,” a small voice filled the room.

Kevin turned and saw their youngest boy rubbing his eyes and standing at the end of the hallway in one piece super-hero PJ’s. Tucker was still half asleep

“Mister, thank you for coming back. I asked Jesus tonight, to save Missy.”