

The image is a vertical composite. The top half shows a calm river reflecting a dense forest of trees with autumn foliage. The bottom half shows a large, multi-story brick building with many windows and chimneys, set against a clear blue sky. In the foreground, the back of a shirtless man's torso and his arm are visible, looking towards the building. The entire image is framed by a vibrant, multi-colored border that resembles a rainbow or a sunset, with shades of orange, yellow, and blue.

Keta Diablo Crossroads: Revisited

Published by Phaze Books
Also by Keta Diablo

Crossroads



This is an explicit and erotic novel
intended for the enjoyment
of adult readers. Please keep
out of the hands of children.

www.Phaze.com

Crossroads Revisited

A novella of homoerotic suspense by

KETA DIABLO

Crossroads Revisited copyright 2009 by Keta Diablo

All rights reserved under the International and Pan-American Copyright Conventions. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

This is a work of fiction. Names, places, characters and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to any actual persons, living or dead, organizations, events or locales is entirely coincidental.



A Phaze Production
Phaze Books
6470A Glenway Avenue, #109
Cincinnati, OH 45211-5222
Phaze is an imprint of Mundania Press, LLC.

To order additional copies of this book, contact:
books@phaze.com
www.Phaze.com

Cover art © 2008, Skyla Dawn Cameron
Edited by Denise Jeffries

eBook ISBN-13: 978-1-59426-778-9
First Edition - June, 2009
Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Warning: the unauthorized reproduction or distribution of this copyrighted work is illegal. Criminal copyright infringement, including infringement without monetary gain, is investigated by the FBI and is punishable by up to 5 years in prison and a fine of \$250,000.

Prologue

Baltimore, Maryland
Present Day

Thomas Kincaid sat up in his bed and glanced at the alarm clock on his nightstand. Four AM. What had awakened him? Something, but his sleep-numbed brain couldn't remember if he'd been dreaming or not. Snoozer didn't bark, and Lord knows the beloved mongrel yelped if a leaf dashed against the windowpane.

Ah, that's right, the yipper accompanied his mother to the cabin for the weekend. He wanted to join them, but promised his professor his term paper, *Human Cloning: Catastrophe or Medical Breakthrough?*, would be on his desk first thing Monday morning. Guilt shrouded him. He shouldn't have gone to the bar tonight. Should've stayed home and finished the damn paper.

He paused for a moment, listening. So slight, he almost failed to hear the subdued footsteps. His heart banged against his rib cage and a surge of adrenaline pumped through his body. What should he do, and where in hell had he left his cell phone? A silent groan left his lips. He'd left it in his backpack on the kitchen table, and the only live phone in the house sat on the bureau in his mom's bedroom.

He pushed the covers back and rose from bed. With the stealth of a cat-burglar, he walked toward the far wall and plucked his Little League bat from the wall—the one he used to hit the only homerun of his life. Not much of a weapon, but he felt more secure clutching the bat in his hand. He opened his bedroom door slowly, one inch at a time.

KETA DIABLO

The bedrooms faced the backyard, and around the neatly trimmed lawn and flower beds stood a privacy fence. He learned long ago how to scale it. For some reason, he felt certain the noise had come from the kitchen, or perhaps the great room in the front of the house. His choices seemed simple—reach his cell phone or his mother’s room. Somehow, he had to call for help.

The noise grew louder. Whoever entered the house seemed emboldened by the lack of response from its inhabitants. He slunk into the hallway and warred over which direction to take, left to the live phone line or right to the kitchen. He chose the first. Better to call the police and climb out his mother’s window. His life held more value than television sets, stereos, or other material items.

Please God, let it be a thief and not some maniacal killer.

Every muscle and tendon in his body launched into high alert. He drew several deep breaths and talked himself down. Most intruders came for cash, jewelry, or hot items they could quickly pawn for drug money. Hadn’t he read somewhere most weren’t armed? Even if he hadn’t read it, the thought comforted him.

He moved down the hallway toward his mother’s room as quiet as a church mouse, his only thought being to get to that phone. Still clutching the bat in his right hand, he slipped into the room, dashed toward the phone, and lifted the receiver with his left hand. At the lack of a dial tone, his heart sunk. Someone cut the line.

A whisper warned him the burglar stood right outside the bedroom door. He froze and a sickening feeling took flight in his gut. This couldn’t be happening; this only happened to others, strangers you read about in the newspaper.

Shit! The newspapers. The headlines loomed behind his eyelids—*Fourth Student Found Dead in the Patuxent*. The door creaked open, the sound reminding him of a scene straight out of *Friday the Thirteenth*. A shadow—tall, dark, and intimidating—moved into the room. Through a shaft of moonlight, he saw the gun in the man’s hand, a nine millimeter he thought. In the other, the man held a flashlight and shined it into Thomas’ face.

“Hello, Thomas.”

CROSSROADS REVISITED

Confusion stormed through his mind. He'd know that voice anywhere. "You! What are you doing here?"

"And I thought you'd be so happy to see me."

Chapter One

Frank McGuire logged off his laptop when the front door of his townhome opened. He drew in a deep breath, gathered his thoughts, and glanced at his watch. Not much time to accomplish his mission, but enough to get to the bottom of Rand's recent behavior.

He rummaged through a nearby drawer until he found what he wanted, then walked into the kitchen and stood at the high counter opposite Rand. "Stopped home for lunch, huh?"

"One hour before my next class," Rand said, stuffing several chunks of watermelon into his mouth.

"How are you doing this semester?"

"Good," Rand said, avoiding his eyes. "Why aren't you at work?"

"I'm on my way in, but waited to talk to you."

"I thought you were meeting with Jeffords and some big hot dog from the FBI this morning."

"They're waiting for me, and stop changing the subject."

"What subject?"

Frank cocked his head to the side and shook it. "Listen, pretty boy, I've lived with you long enough to know when something's rotten in Denmark. Think of me as a Blue Tick Coonhound sniffing out a raccoon."

"Dumb me." Rand plucked a handful of grapes from the bowl and continued with his mouth full. "I thought you found missing people for a living after connecting with your Inner Spirit."

"I do, and that's why I want you to have a better job, a better life." Frank plopped onto the stool. "So, how are your classes going: Anatomy, Physics, and all the courses you need for Pre-Med?"

CROSSROADS REVISITED

A moment of panic flitted through Rand's deep green eyes, but his voice remained calm. "Good, I'm expecting A's and B's this quarter."

"Your expectations have fallen a little short," Frank said, tossing a printout of his grades onto the counter.

Rand's body tensed, so imperceptibly most wouldn't have noticed, but Frank knew every nuance of that perfect body...and every inch. "C's and C minuses right down the line. Oh, I stand corrected, a D in Chemistry."

"I can explain," Rand said, licking his bottom lip.

"I'm sure you have something prepared, but I'm not interested. Refresh my memory about our agreement when you came to live here?"

Rand looked away.

"I'll remind you. You promised if I agreed to let you live here, you'd pull A's and B's, and work hard to get the education your mom has spent thousands of dollars on."

"My classes are so hard this semester and—"

"Save it, Rand. You're one of the brightest kids on the planet, and only two reasons exist for pulling C's and D's. One is laziness, the other, MJ." Frank nodded toward the liquor cabinet. "Or Jack Daniels."

Rand watched him through hooded eyes and squirmed in the chair. "I'm not smoking weed. Give me another chance. I'll buckle down, bring those grades up to A's and B's next semester."

"Oh, I have no doubt you'll bring them up...every single one. Just to make sure you know I'm dead serious, finish your lunch, drop your jeans, and head for the couch."

"What?"

"You heard me."

"Why?"

"You don't need to know until you're done eating."

Rand pushed his plate away. "Lost my appetite."

"I'll give you one chance to tell me why my Jack Daniels is bottoming out all the time, and you should know," Frank added, "I've been marking the bottles."

He hedged.

KETA DIABLO

"I'll start counting, and for every second that passes, I'll match it with a welt on your ass."

"Wait..."

"One, two, three..."

"Christ, stop counting. I'm going to tell you."

"Four, five, six."

"I stole it."

Frank rolled his eyes. "You could have knocked me over with a feather. It's a two-fold question: are you using other drugs and why did you steal my whiskey?"

"I hit the legal age limit four years ago, Frank."

"This isn't about the legal age limit and you know it!" Anger gave way to concern. "A former pot head exchanges one vice for another turning to alcohol. Are you using drugs?"

"No, I'm not."

"You gave your word you'd stay away from alcohol while you attended college and lived with me. We made an agreement, and you broke it."

Rand's gaze carried less fear than his voice. "Everyone parties at Johns Hopkins, that's what preppies do."

"That's the oldest excuse in the book, and I don't care about the others. Your mother would freak if she saw your grades, and she only agreed to let you live here for two reasons. One, you wanted to, and two, you promised to quit the drugs and get a degree in medicine."

Rand fell mute and chewed on the inside of his cheek. The most beautiful kid Frank ever laid eyes on. Frank had to remind himself to rein in his lust right now. An impossible undertaking no matter how hard he tried. Rand wasn't a kid, but Frank had known him since he rode a bike to get around. The lines blurred at times, wandering between an overwhelming desire to fuck him senseless one minute and protect him from everything in the world the next.

A stream of sunlight fell through the kitchen window, capturing Rand's shiny black hair and sculpted features. Need and hot desire rushed through Frank's veins, replaced moments later by a bleak image of Rand floating listlessly in the water, his long, dark hair fanned out around him. Damn the dreams and visions.

CROSSROADS REVISITED

“Rand, five young men have died now, college students, after a night of binge drinking at a bar.”

“Oh, get off it. You know they didn’t die from drinking.”

“No, they drowned after walking into the river during a drunken stupor.”

Rand shook his head. “It’s incredible you believe that—you, a man who dabbles in perceptions and has the ability to connect with his Inner Spirit. Have you consulted it, Frank, huh?”

“Yes, damn it, I have, and we’re not going to talk about that now. All I know is five men are dead, you took my whisky and broke promises to your mother and me.” He reached across the counter and grabbed the collar of his shirt. “You going to drop your jeans, or should I forcefully take them off you?”

His moss-green eyes sparked, yet his voice trembled. Frank wondered at times if Rand feared him. He knew he loved him, but he didn’t want Rand to be afraid of him. It was a double-edged sword and another fucking complication in Frank’s life. He cringed at the word *love*, tried to convince himself what he felt for Rand fell under the category of hot, primal lust. Truthfully, there were times those indelible boundaries blurred, too, meshed together until Frank thought he’d die if Rand left his life.

“Jesus, you’re serious?”

Frank nodded.

“Can I leave my boxers on?” he asked, keeping his eyes on Frank’s belt.

“I’m not going to use the belt on your ass if that’s what you’re wondering, and no, you can’t. Ditch everything from the waist down.”

“But, if you’re not going to use the belt, why do I have—”

Frank rose, walked around the ledge, and grabbed a lock of his hair. “Do I look like I need to explain everything to you? Now, drop those jeans and boxers, and get on your knees before the couch.”

Rand unzipped his denims, slid them down his hips, and next went the boxers.

“Step out of them and be quick about it.” Frank pointed to the couch. “I’m late for work.”

Visibly trembling, Rand kicked his jeans away and walked toward the sofa. Frank followed Rand and plopped onto the cushions in front of him. "Lift your shirt, let me see if you're turned on." The tip of Rand's hard cock glistened like a ripe, purple plum. Frank didn't know what he wanted to do more, suck him off until he whimpered and begged, or turn his ass red. "Good boy, now come here." He tapped the paddle he'd pulled out on the cushion.

"You said you weren't going to spank me."

"I'm not going to *whip* you. I'm going to give you the spanking of your life. There's a difference, and if I have to ask you again, I'll use the belt."

When Rand dropped onto the sofa, Frank pulled him onto his lap and pushed his face into the cushions. Holding Rand's upper body down with a strong arm, he ran his fingers down the length of Rand's spine, his touch light and meant to heighten the tension. Rand's body trembled. Frank spread Rand's cheeks and found his hole with his finger, circling the outer rim gently.

Rand emitted a soft moan. "What-what are you doing? Oh, God."

"Getting that puckered hole ready for the ass plug."

Frank slid his thumb in and applied pressure up and down, left and right, stretching it amid Rand's cries of bliss. Without uttering a word, Frank picked the anal plug from his pocket and brought it up to where his fingers worked their magic. With expert skill, he positioned the plug next to his index finger and, removing the digit, slipped in the toy. Rand jerked forward and upward.

"Oh, God, oh," he said between short, little pants.

Frank twisted the plug and moved it in and out, his movements tortuously slow as he held Rand firmly over his knees. "Feel that? It's all the way in." Frank pushed hard on the end of the plug.

Rand buried his face in the cushion and a low groan escaped from his lips.

"I don't have to tell you, the spanking is coming hard and fast. I'm going to turn that firm, ripe ass of yours red."

Quivering with expectancy, Rand's body instinctively tensed. When Frank brought the paddle down hard, Rand

CROSSROADS REVISITED

writhed beneath him and buried his pelvic bones into Frank's lap. Frank whacked him three times and waited, allowing him time to absorb the pain. Rand whimpered when Frank ran his hands across the raised welts. "Think about that plug up your ass while I spank you."

Rand tensed his butt cheeks again.

Frank's cock swelled and pulsated in the same fashion it always did when he looked at Rand's ass. The kid had the most amazing bottom he'd ever seen in his life. Taut, smooth, and firm, a dimple resided in the hollow of his back where spine ended and cheeks began. Seized by a momentum to turn it crimson and hear Rand moan, he launched into a serious spanking, the paddle moving rapidly over every part of his bottom. It turned pink before morphing in hue to a pale red. Rand gyrated in his lap and cried out. Before long, groans escaped his lips and his pelvis rocked in sync with the measured strokes.

Frank stopped briefly and slipped his hand between Rand's hips and his knees, not the least bit surprised to feel his rock-hard erection. "You get off when I beat your ass, don't you, Rand?"

He shook his head.

"Yes, you do, you lying little fuck. You're so hot and hard, you're ready to burst. You want to come, pretty boy? Want to spill your seed while I spank you?"

"God, I'll bring my grades up, I promise."

Frank dug his elbow into his back. "I asked you a question, and you better tell me the truth. I'm giving you an opportunity to jerk yourself off while I turn your ass red. Do you want to do that?"

He nodded on a frustrated groan.

Frank handed him a handkerchief. "Come into this, and don't spill a drop on my couch. You hear me?"

Rand nodded, took the hankie from him, and lifted his hips to wrap the fabric around the tip of his cock. Frank slapped the back of his thighs hard, mesmerized by the red welts the paddle left on his pale skin. When he moved on to Rand's flaming ass cheeks and brought the paddle down swift and hard, Rand's body jerked upward. He set upon him savagely, until he

whimpered softly. Still Frank didn't stop. He knew he should, but he was so turned on by the image of Rand bucking beneath him while his ass turned bright red. And every time he thought about the whiskey, the lies, and dead men, he brought it down again.

"You love the pain and pleasure all rolled into one, don't you, Rand?"

"Oh, God, yes, yes."

Rand lifted his ass, his hand pumping hard on the cock beneath his gyrating bottom. Strangled moans and groans came from the back of his throat.

"Oh, God, it's coming, I'm going to come, don't stop. Spank me hard, Frank, don't stop. I'm coming, oh Christ, here it comes."

Rand's body stiffened and cries of pleasure echoed in the room. He bucked his hips up and down, and pitched his body forward. At the last second, Frank cupped Rand's penis in his hand and felt his release. On and on it went, hot and wet exploding into the hankie. It stopped jerking for a second and spurt again and again in an endless stream of thick semen. Frank milked Rand's cock as it jerked spasmodically in the last throes of ejaculation. Rand's ass, high in the air, quivered like jelly. A series of rapturous moans escaped his lips before he collapsed against Frank's lap.

"Better than you ever imagined, huh, pretty boy? I think you make it your mission to piss me off so I punish you."

"You're a cold-hearted bastard," Rand said, trying to catch his breath.

"You still hiding in that closet?"

"Fuck you. Anyone's body would respond to—"

Frank couldn't help the mockery in his laugh. "You came so hard just now, you almost passed out."

"Let me go. I gotta get back to class."

"One more thing before I let you up. I'm not a babysitter. You want to fuck up in school, go ahead, but you'll be back living with your mother quicker than flies mate." He rubbed his hand over his ass. "And maybe I'll start looking for an honest, mature roommate."

CROSSROADS REVISITED

“Go ahead, McGuire,” Rand said, his voice edged with cockiness. “Remember, though, all the good-looking queers sit by me in school.”

Frank grabbed him by his shirt collar and yanked his neck back. “Are you threatening me, pretty boy? You’ve had a taste of your first man and now you want to know if there’s someone better out there?”

“No,” he said, his voice quavering. “You just piss me off sometimes.”

“Good.” Frank released him. “That makes us even.”

When Frank scooted out from under him, Rand scrambled from the couch, scurried to his boxers and jeans on the floor, and pulled them over his hips. He picked up his backpack and headed for the front door, stopping at the sound of Frank’s voice.

“I’ll be late tonight since I had to stay home this morning and perform my duties.”

He jerked around, his eyes dark and hot. “You’re not my fucking keeper!”

“No,” he said, “I’m not, and I’ll make sure you know that when I get home tonight. If you know what’s good for you, you’ll be here at seven o’clock, naked and in my bed.”

Rand didn’t answer him, but left the townhome in a huff, slamming the door behind him.

Chapter Two

Frank pulled the Denali onto the interstate and headed for his office. A curse left his lips when his latte went flying while reaching for his cell phone on the passenger seat. “Hey, Grace,” he said after flipping it open. “I bet you’re wondering if I died.”

His office assistant’s throaty laugh echoed through the line. “That would be a cold day in Hell.”

“Which, that I died or you’d be wondering?”

“I always worry about you, Frank, you know that. How would I pay my rent if you died?” Before he had a chance to answer, she changed the subject. “Baltimore’s finest is here and he brought the upper brass with him.”

“Is that code for Jeffords and the FBI?”

“You’re so perceptive, Frank, no pun intended. When should I say you’ll arrive?”

“How about ten minutes? As soon as I wipe the double-shot mocha off the seat of my car, I’m there.”

“Over and out,” Grace said and hung up.

Frank parked the Denali in front of the old brownstone and rushed up the steps with images of Rand flashing through his brain. Hounded by the pervasive snapshots, the quick-flash montage left him with a queasy, bleak feeling. His Inner Spirit had sent transmissions for days—dark, subliminal messages that warned of something evil riding the wind. What did they have to do with Rand?

Frank’s dismal musings were interrupted by Jeffords when he entered Grace’s outer sanctuary. “McGuire, long time no see.”

“Not long enough,” Frank whispered under his breath before turning to the men with a smile. “Jeffords, how’s life?”

“Ugly, Frank, nastier than ever.” Jeffords’ eyebrows lowered in remembrance of the man beside him. “This is

CROSSROADS REVISITED

Hayworth, Rueben Hayworth, lead agent out of the Washington agency.”

Hayworth extended his hand. “McGuire.”

Nothing about the young man squealed FBI. Handsome, with blond hair and eyes the color of gun-metal, along with an aloof air, set him apart from the other agents Frank had met over the years. The man reeked of poise and confidence for one so young.

“FBI, and all the way from Washington?” Frank said, offering his hand. “Someone must be stirring up a ruckus in Baltimore.”

“Come on now, Frank, don’t start with that baloney. You know why we’re here,” Jeffords said with a gentle nudge to his shoulder.

“Not officially, but I read the newspaper.” Frank turned to Grace. “How about some coffee?”

“It’s brewing, Frank. I’ll be in with a carafe in two minutes. Mr. Jeffords, Mr. Hayworth, do either of you take cream or sugar?”

Jeffords shook his head and Hayworth held up two fingers. “Cream, thank you, ma’am.”

“This way,” Frank said, leading them into his office. “Have a seat.”

Hayworth and Jeffords sat in front of his desk. The agent took in his surroundings, typical of every FBI man Frank had ever met. Jeffords crossed his ankles and leaned back in the chair. Frank didn’t dislike Jeff Jeffords. On the contrary, he found him genial enough, but the man annoyed the piss out of him and at times seemed denser than swamp moss.

“Okay, here’s the deal on this one, Frank,” Jeffords said, pausing for a moment when Grace came through the door with the coffee. “I faxed the specifics on The Black Rail case to the FBI when we closed out the case and Agent Hayworth picked up on your name. He’s read every one of your notes, Frank, beginning to end, knows you took a bullet in the line of duty.”

Frank was all in favor putting Jeffords in his place, and reminding him he didn’t take the bullet for the Department. Remembering his manners and his guest, he looked out the

window and said, "I hoped to never hear the name of that file again."

"In any event, I did read the file." Reuben's voice pulled Frank back to the conversation. "And here we are a year later with another dilemma on our hands."

"Dilemma?" Frank asked.

"Yes," Hayworth said calmly. "The five college students who turned up dead in the Patuxent River."

"Not the Little Patuxent this time," Jeffords said. "The big river."

Frank rolled his eyes. Didn't he just tell Jeffords he'd read the newspaper reports? "And?"

"Unlike local opinion," Jeffords added, "we don't believe there's another serial killer on the loose."

Hayworth came to his feet, poured a cup of coffee, and watched Jeffords' hand movements as he talked to Frank.

"You know how college kids are, drinking, binging, carousing into the wee hours of the night. I've looked at every case in detail, and it's quite simple," Jeffords added boastfully. "They slammed down one too many tequilas, left the bar and walked into the river."

"They weren't all at the same bar," Frank reminded him.

"No, they weren't, but the river runs the length of all the bars they frequented," Hayworth said.

"Don't you find it strange it's only been men, and all five walked into the river at different locations?"

"What are you insinuating, McGuire?" Hayworth settled into his chair again. "Don't tell me you're buying this bull that there's a killer on the loose again, only now he isn't targeting Goth girls, he's picking gay college students?"

"What did you say?" Frank leaned in over his desk.

"You didn't know that, did you?" Jeffords said with a smirk. "Yep, light in the loafers, every one of 'em. We kept that little tidbit out of the papers, and you can bet their parents aren't going to be spreading the news."

"If they even know," Hayworth added.

Jeffords annoyed the hell out of Frank at times—the man *and* his departmentalized labels. Light in the loafers? In Frank's opinion, Jeffords was light in the brain cell department. While

CROSSROADS REVISITED

squashing an uncontrollable urge to reach over and strangle the little pipsqueak, Jeffords' smart-ass phrase sunk in. So *that's* what the latent dreams and images meant. Five gay men were dead. Frank's stomach clenched and Rand's face rose before him.

Sick.

He was going to be sick. He'd been down this road many times, and his Inner Spirit never failed him. He didn't always know the exact nature of the messages, but his subconscious never fell short of its goal—to rouse his precognitive abilities.

He wanted the men gone from his office, now, this minute. He needed to dim the lights, light a candle or two, and connect with a higher level of consciousness, take a peek into the future. Damn, he should have done it days ago when the images nagged at his addle-pated brain. Too wrapped up in his feelings for Rand and the kid's irrational behavior, he'd failed to heed the warnings.

Jeffords narrowed his eyes. "McGuire...you still with us?"

"Yeah, I mean, yes, I'm listening. What does your visit have to do with me?"

Jeffords looked at Hayworth, and Frank couldn't help but wonder about the agent's cool, collective demeanor. He didn't seem eager to offer an opinion, and Frank really wondered about that.

"We, that is, the Department and the FBI, hope you'll attend the meeting tomorrow night at City Hall to settle the natives down, convince them there is not another maniac prowling the city, but rather it's the result of overindulgence."

"Why would they listen to me, Jeffords?"

"Emily thinks they will."

Frank nearly came out of his chair. "Emily...Quinn Brennan's widow, Rand and Marlow's mother? What has she got to do with this?"

"Haven't you spoken to her lately?" Jeffords asked.

"Last week. Why?"

Another lopsided grin split Jeffords' lips. "You probably don't know, but the last kid we found is the son of Emily Brennan's best friend."

Frank picked up the newspaper and glanced at the headlines: *Another College Student Missing*. And next, Frank looked at the young man's picture. "Thomas Kincaid? This kid?"

"Yep, found his body early this morning. Emily and Martha Kincaid were high school friends. Emily wants you brought in, and the pressure is on. She claims the parents don't trust the police or the FBI and they want a neutral to look things over, meet with them, and deliver the facts straight up."

Hayworth cleared his throat. "Jeffords tells me you deal in a form of clairvoyance?"

Frank shot Jeffords a stern glare and turned to the man. "I'm not a clairvoyant and Jeffords knows it. I dabble, and I want to stress *dabble*, in perceptions, a skill learned through meditation and personal discipline. It's not recognized by the medical community, it's a...a—"

"You commune with the dead, huh, Frank? You can talk to spirits and ghosts. Tell Reuben, he's already read your file anyway."

Hayworth studied him, and Frank couldn't imagine what thoughts must be flitting through the man's procedural brain. He held no illusions about the FBI's opinions on clairvoyants, spirit walkers, and the all the other derivatives. Hell, the government might be out a job if they relied on mystical beings to solve their crimes.

"I've read it, McGuire. I take my career very seriously and follow proper procedure in every regard, but I'm not a skeptic by nature. That is, I embrace mysticism and non-conventional theories on a personal level."

Frank looked into his eyes and knew the man spoke the truth. People didn't lie about or encourage such philosophies if they weren't learned about them.

"Whether you believe it or not, the FBI has worked with several psychics in solving some of our most difficult cases."

"I repeat, Hayworth, I'm not a psychic or a clairvoyant."

Smoke-gray eyes met his. "I know what you are, McGuire, I've read the file, remember? Numbers or letters come to you through dreams, but they're convoluted. You have learned through mediation how to connect with your inner spirit, tap into a wellspring of spiritual energy. This inner spirit performs as a

CROSSROADS REVISITED

catalyst to connect with an even higher level of consciousness. Scenes flash through your head akin to water rushing over rocks.”

Damn, the man had smarts...and moxie. He’d just repeated the notes Frank left in the file on the The Black Rail case, verbatim. “Cut to the chase, what exactly do you want from me?”

“Your time,” Hayworth said. “We’ll pay you, of course, to go over the file, see if Jeffords and his Department are right—there is no serial killer on the loose. The young men died after consuming too much alcohol, at least that’s the unofficial statement for the time being. They left the bar, lost their way, and walked into the Patuxent.” He nodded toward Jeffords. “That’s his summation.”

“And if I don’t believe the reports or agree with his assessment?”

Hayworth rose and Jeffords followed suit. “Then, my friend, we have a serious problem.”

Frank put his hand out. “Give me the file.”

“I didn’t bring it. Wasn’t sure you’d agree to look it over. Would it be all right with you if I dropped it off this evening, say, around six o’clock?”

So much for his night of pleasure with Rand. “I won’t be at my office at six.” Frank handed him his card. “Here’s my home address. Be on time, I have plans later this evening.”

“You can count on it,” Hayworth said and turned toward the door with Jeffords on his heels.

Frank resisted the urge to jump up and punch Jeffords in the face when he called out over his shoulder, “I knew we could count on you again, Frank. See you tomorrow night at the meeting.”

* * * *

No sooner had the men left his office when Grace buzzed Frank on the intercom. “Emily Brennan is on the line.”

“Thanks, Grace,” Frank said with an exasperated sigh. He didn’t need to hear from Emily today of all days. There would be questions about Rand, hysterics over the death of her best

friend's son, and no doubt she'd want to corner him about the meeting at City Hall tomorrow night. He punched line one. "How's the most beautiful woman in the world?"

"Frank, I've been trying to reach you all morning." Yep, hysterics laced her sultry voice.

"Calm down, Emily. I'm sorry, I turned my cell off this morning until I left for the office."

"I know. Grace couldn't reach you either and you were late getting into the office. Is something wrong, Frank? Is Rand in trouble?"

Damn, he didn't want to get into the alcohol and barely-passing-grades crisis right now. She had enough to deal with. "No, Rand is fine." His mind raced while she drew a deep breath of relief. "An FBI agent, accompanied by one of Baltimore's finest, showed up at my office this morning."

"Let me guess," she said sarcastically. "Sergeant Jeffords?"

"The one and only."

"Makes you thankful he wasn't on the force when you were, huh?"

"Ah, he's an okay guy, just a little misdirected at times."

"So you know why I'm calling. I hear it in your voice, and that you can attribute to being Quinn's partner on the force."

Frank chuckled. "We do go back a long way, don't we?"

"Eight years, my knight in shining armor." She sighed again. "Don't know how I would have survived without you since Quinn died."

"Oh-oh, guilt just took up residence in my gut."

"If you're talking about the five years you were MIA, we've discussed it, and I've forgiven you. I know you loved Quinn, as you do Marlow and Rand."

Ah, his chance to change the subject. "How is Marlow these days, doing well in school?"

"Her senior year and you know how that goes—too many parties, too many boyfriends, and too little studying. It's a battle, but we're getting on fine. She misses Rand not living at home, as do I, but I know the best place for him after losing his father is with you."

He closed his eyes. "Emily, I'm not Rand's father. We've never talked about it outright, but surely you know—"

“Stop right there. My mother said I arrived during the night, but not last night. I know Rand struggles with his sexual identity—have known it for years. Quinn knew it, too. We talked about it on many occasions.” He pictured tears brimming in the green eyes, an exact replica of Rand’s. “And I know you’ve warred with the very same issue.” An ironic laugh followed her words. “If one has a sense of humor, it is rather comedic, don’t you think? The virile, tough street cop turned PI, the man women wet their panties over, is gay.”

“Christ, Emily, you’re no good at bat-fowling, either.”

“Bat-fowling, beating around the bush, I learned that from you. We share an odd sort of intimacy, wouldn’t you agree?”

“Yes, we do, and I’m happy to call you friend, a true friend.”

“Good, me too, and that’s why I know I can count on you again. Jeffords no doubt told you they found another college student floating in the Patuxent this morning.” She choked on the last words.

“He did, and I’m sorry to hear the kid is the son of your friend, Martha.”

“She’s devastated. Divorced ten years ago. Thomas is an only child and Martha thinks the sun and moon exist just for him.” Another pause and he heard the wheels turning in her pretty head. “What else did Jeffords say? I get the feeling the Department is holding back.”

“He didn’t say anything specific about Thomas other than they found him this morning like you said. As for the other part of your question, the Department always withholds evidence from the public. They hold crime scene evidence close to their chest—things only a killer would know.”

“So you think there is a killer?”

“Hold on now, Em. I didn’t say that. I don’t know enough about the case, only what I’ve read in the papers.”

“You’re doing that bat-fowling thing. I know you’ve channeled this, tapped into your inner spirit or whatever you call it.” When he didn’t answer she asked, “Am I right?”

He blew air out his lips. “Yes.”

“I knew it! And?”

“I just don’t know.”

KETA DIABLO

“Frank...”

“All right. I’ve had some strange dreams lately, but convoluted, murky.”

“Dreams about whom, about what?”

Christ, why did she have to call him today? “About shiny, metallic objects.”

“Thanks for narrowing it down.” He heard her slosh something down, coffee most likely. “That could be anything.”

“Needles.”

“Sewing needles?”

Frank looked at his briefcase lying on the chair beside him and struggled for words. “No, as in syringes.”

“Frank, do you think it means the young men who died were into drugs?”

“Back up three or four sentences. Didn’t I say my dreams are always murky? Christ, Emily, it could mean anything from diabetes to nursing homes.”

He heard her doorbell ring.

“Damn, hang on.”

Frank kept the phone to his ear and listened to the muffled voices in the background, Emily’s and a man’s. He couldn’t make out the words, but heard her laugh once. As always, the sonorous chuckle reassured him. Damn, she shouldn’t have to be going through this again, whatever *this* evolved into. After losing her husband in a botched bank robbery, and raising two kids on her own, she had a right to a normal life.

“That was an interesting conversation,” she said, returning.

“Who came calling?”

“One of Rand’s professors. He said Rand left a notebook on his desk yesterday so he looked up our address in the office and dropped it off on his lunch hour. Thought maybe Rand would need it before tomorrow.”

“That’s our boy, always on the ball.”

“I think he’s been stricken with Attention Deficit Disorder since his father died, but anyway, you were telling me about the dreams.”

“Dreams, what dreams?”

“Stop it, Frank. You’re making me edgier, if that’s possible.”

CROSSROADS REVISITED

“Okay, the dreams involve Rand.”

“What!” The hysterics returned.

“I told you they were muddled, they don’t mean anything at this point.”

“Oh, don’t tell me that. Your dreams always mean something even if they are fucked up. I’m scared, Frank. The parents are convinced there’s another serial killer stalking the college and the FBI insists they’re acting out of panic and misinformation.”

“What do you think?”

“Come on, you’ve got to be kidding! Five students dead after leaving a bar, found in the river? What are the odds?”

“The FBI claims it happens all the time. College kids are prime candidates for alcohol-related deaths running the gamut from falling off balconies, poisonings, car accidents or other freak accidents.”

“No one fell off a balcony, their blood alcohol content showed intoxication, but not enough to cause death, and they did *not* die in car accidents. Freak accidents all right, as in some *freak* killed them.”

“Settle down. Maybe the toxicology reports showed something the police aren’t divulging right now.”

“Like what?”

“Oh, I don’t know...drug use or some other commonality. You know drug users come in all forms, ages.” Thinking about his discussion with Rand that morning, he visibly cringed. If the little fucker had lied to him again, he’d have to send him packing. “I’ve promised Hayworth—”

“Who’s Hayworth?”

“The agent Washington sent to investigate. I promised him I’d go over the file. He’s bringing it to me tonight.”

“Thank God, and you’ll attend the meeting tomorrow night at City Hall?”

“I’ll be there, Emily, promise.”

She blew a sigh of relief. “You sure you’re not holding anything back about Rand?”

“Not a thing,” he said, and called himself a liar. “I gotta run, sweet lips. I’ll call you tomorrow after I review the file.”

“Sweet lips. The name brings back so many fond memories.”

Frank laughed as an image of Emily’s husband flashed before him. “I used to call you that all the time just to piss Quinn off. Told him one day I’d be kissing those sweet lips.”

“What did he say?” she asked with a snuffle.

“He said, ‘Yeah, when you come back reincarnated as a hot-blooded straight guy.’ I told him at least he had the hot-blooded part right.”

He loved it when she laughed, always had. “You’ll call me tomorrow?”

“You can count on it, Em.”

“Love you, Frank.”

“Ditto,” he said and clicked *end* on his cell phone.

The black cloud descended again, whether from talking about the dreams with Emily or from the visit with the FBI and Jeffords, he didn’t know. He leaned back in the chair with his head resting against the soft leather and closed his eyes. How could this be fucking happening again?

Chapter Three

Frank knew he was in over his head when it came to Rand, but the time had passed for recriminations and told-you-sos. The kid was beautiful, plain and simple, with the most delectable body, the most taut, provocative ass he'd ever seen. He'd been the first one to fuck that virgin bottom and the thought of someone else even touching Rand made him want to seek the unknown person out and kill him.

He drew a deep breath. In his field, people killed for three reasons: sex, money, and love. Truth might as well have arrived in the form of a dull butcher knife. Christ, he'd fallen in love with Rand.

* * * *

Rand walked across campus, acutely aware of the sting on his butt cheeks and something hard and thick inside his ass. Every time he took a step, the plug moved inside him. God, so decadently perverted, what would McGuire think of next? Rand wondered if his cock would deflate at all today. Throbbing and leaking like a son of a bitch, his permanent erection served as a constant reminder of the spanking from Frank. Heat rose in his cheeks and he imagined his face matched the color of his ass right now. Christ, had he actually begged Frank to spank him? Oh, God, had he jerked himself off during the spanking and screamed louder than a colicky baby? He had. And he would again, given the opportunity.

Every man's dream...every woman's, too, if one went by the way they drooled over Frank. Rand admitted he had officially joined their ranks. Topping the charts at six feet, the man's ripped, muscled body, oozed primitive sexuality. Crude and unabashedly bold, Frank delivered pleasure in spades. He

frightened and thrilled Rand beyond comprehension. He ached for his touch, yearned to feel his cock slamming into him. Once the man touched him, Rand became doughier than putty under his caresses. He'd do anything to have the man lick his flesh, stroke his shaft, or continue to touch him in the most intimate of places. He didn't care what Frank did to him...as long as kept on doing it. The man had the ability to make him whimper, squirm, and yes, beg.

He walked into class and looked at the students hunkered down at their desks. He wondered if any had anal toys up their asses. No, of course, they didn't. Only Frank McGuire would think of such a thing. He knew how to heighten the tension until Rand was nearly mindless with thoughts of what he'd do to him next. It could be any number of things, and the thoughts brought him to the brink of orgasm.

He slid into the desk and resisted the urge to moan out loud when the ass plug pushed upward. As soon as class ended, he'd have to do something about his stiff cock. Frank didn't say he couldn't jack off; he just couldn't remove the plug. Christ, had the man lost his mind? Who'd want to remove something that pitched them into mind-numbing sensations of being fucked all day?

Rand found it hard to concentrate on the professor's lesson of the day—anatomy of the temporal bone and ear. The ass plug and lying naked in Frank's bed tonight occupied his every thought. Oh, God. Tonight couldn't come soon enough.

His heart sank. It wasn't about the sex and mind-blowing pleasure the man brought him. He loved Frank, really loved him, and Frank thought of him as a plaything, a punk kid built for his sexual fantasies. Somehow, he had to get Frank to admit that deep down he loved him, and thought of him as more than a sexual object. He knew Frank did, he saw it in his eyes sometimes when he looked at him. Not when they were having sex, but other times when they were out on the town or playing Frisbee in the park. Frank looked at him strangely on those occasions, not with hunger for his body, but with something deep and secretive that Frank wouldn't own up to.

“Mr. Brennan, I asked you a question.”

CROSSROADS REVISITED

Rand jolted back to the classroom and looked at his professor. He didn't know if Doctor McBride had actually earned a Ph.D. A physician, the man came to John Hopkins to teach shortly after Doctor Bengston died. Rand missed Bengston, a young man of forty who passed away unexpectedly and left three young kids behind. Maybe the pangs of remorse Rand felt from his teacher's death hit too close to home after losing his father at such a young age.

"Mr. Brennan!"

"I'm sorry, sir, I missed the question."

"You missed my question about the carotid artery and jugular venous drainage system because you were too busy watching the meadowlarks outside, were you not?"

"Guilty as charged, sir, and I apologize."

"Are you aware of how many young men would give their eye teeth to be occupying your desk, Mr. Brennan?"

"Yes, Doctor McBride, I am."

"If you don't want to be here, Brennan, give up your chair to someone who does."

"Yes, sir. I mean, I do want to be here, sir."

The doctor looked over his glasses. "See me after class, Rand."

Oh, God, the King of Siam knew his first name. There would be hell to pay for this if Frank or his mother found out.

Rand made an attempt to sneak out the door after class, hoping McBride had forgotten the incident, but no such luck. "Mr. Brennan, you don't plan to leave without seeing me, do you?"

"No, sir, I planned to return after I visited the restroom."

"The restroom will have to wait." He motioned him forward. "Have a seat, and we'll attempt to get to the bottom of what's keeping you from your studies these days."

Rand slid into the chair, wilier than a snake winding his way through a garden, acutely aware of the plug knocking against his sensitive nerve endings.

"Where do you live, Mr. Brennan?"

"You mean in what part of Baltimore, sir?"

"No, I mean with whom do you reside?"

Rand faltered on the words. "My mother, Doctor McBride, why?"

The doc gave him one of those you-little-liar-looks before he spoke. "That's strange. Yesterday, you left your anatomy notebook on your desk, and today I stopped by the address listed in your file. A woman answered the door, introduced herself as your mother. When I asked to speak with you, she said you didn't live there."

"Well, I do and I don't." Rand squirmed in the chair. Between the plug and the man's intense scrutiny, misery could be labeled his best friend. "That is, I lived with my mother until several months ago when I moved in with a friend."

"Hmm, well, your mother took the notebook. Did you receive it?"

"No, I did not, sir, but I haven't seen to my mother yet today."

"I suggest you contact her tonight and retrieve your notebook." He pushed the glasses up the bridge of his nose. "I sensed she's worried about you."

Rand's heart thudded. "You did? Did you tell her anything else, sir?"

"Now what else would I tell her, that you watch meadowlarks mate instead of participating in class? Hmm? Should I have told her that?"

"No, sir, she would be upset with me."

"As am I, young man." His tone softened. "Does your mother have a husband? Perhaps I should speak to your father about your latent distractions and boredom in class. I'm certain he'd want to know how his money is being frittered away."

"Not anymore."

Flashbacks of his father rose behind his eyelids, and tears surfaced. He fought them back and looked into McBride's eyes. "He died about six years ago, shot during a bank robbery."

The man stilled and studied him. "I'm sorry to hear that, but I don't think he'd be proud of your behavior these days. Hear me well, Mr. Brennan, I won't tolerate sloth. If you don't plan to be an active member of my class, I'll be forced to ask you to withdraw."

CROSSROADS REVISITED

“It won’t happen again...that thing with the meadowlarks. I promise to improve. You can count on that, Doctor McBride.”

“Good, do we have an understanding?”

Rand nodded.

“One more thing and you may leave. As you know, I’m new to Johns Hopkins, and although I don’t personally know the young men who recently died, what do you attribute it to?”

“Pardon, sir?”

“It’s a simple question. Do you believe the students walked into the Patuxent like the police claim or do you think nefarious undertakings are underfoot?”

He hesitated and wondered which answer the man wanted. Deciding to go with his gut feeling he said, “I don’t believe it’s possible that five men, about the same age, would die under the same circumstances in the same city without some assistance.”

An interminable amount of time passed before McBride spoke. “In other words, you believe, as do others, a serial killer stalks the streets of Baltimore?”

“Yes, sir, I think it’s more than likely.”

“Very well, Mr. Brennan, our little tête-à-tête is over. Remember what I said about participating in class from this day forward.”

“You can count on it, sir.”

With that, Rand scrambled from the desk and rushed out the door of the classroom, too horny at the moment to think about anything but jacking off in the restroom.

Chapter Four

Frank picked up his briefcase, closed the door to his office, and stopped at his assistant's desk. "I'm leaving for the day, Grace. I have several stops before I meet Hayworth at my home."

"You have an appointment at eight bells in the morning, Mr. and Mrs. Dondelinger."

"The name rings familiar. Who are they again?"

"Husband and wife from New Jersey. Their eighteen-year-old daughter disappeared two months ago."

He chewed on his lower lip. "Oh, yes, after prom."

Grace nodded. "You spoke to them on the phone a week ago and promised to sniff a piece of her clothing, see if you can channel a location where they might find her."

"Very funny, Grace. Must you use the word *sniff*?"

"What's wrong with that? I think in another life you were a wolfhound or perhaps a tracker."

"See you at eight," he said with a shake of his head.

He didn't really have several stops to make, but he wanted to get home, dim the lights, and channel his Inner Spirit. With any luck, something would cut through the dissimulated messages. He'd have to meditate before Hayworth arrived, and of course, Rand would be home at seven.

He parked the Denali in his usual underground parking spot, locked it and, too tired to tackle the stairs, took the elevator to the main level. After dropping his briefcase on the kitchen table, he lit the candles in the great room, left the lights off, and settled into the La-Z-Boy. Without an object in his hand, he'd have to delve deep into meditation, place himself in a subconscious state, and hope something—anything—would materialize.

Five minutes into a series of deep belly breaths, his sixth chakra opened—the Inner Eye. He willed his muscles to relax

CROSSROADS REVISITED

and closed his eyes, studying the shield that always appeared. The screen wasn't important, but rather the images that, with any luck, would appear. A kaleidoscope of colors writhed before him—white, red, and yellow—similar to the longitudinal stripes on garter snakes. He focused on the twisting ribbons without attempting to interpret them right now. That step came later when his consciousness shifted, and hopefully he'd slip into a dreamlike state. Only during that stage would his mind be malleable enough to connect with his Inner Spirit, the channel pitching him into a higher level of awareness.

Scenes flashed through his head, a montage of vague distortions. Snapshots of the victims rushed forth, hazier than the water they floated in. Their arms akimbo, their legs flaccid, there could be no doubt they were dead.

Frank placed his fingers to his cheeks to ease the sudden pain to his sinuses. He struggled to breathe, and in the next instant developed a full-blown nosebleed. Warm and sticky, the blood trickled into his mouth and stained his shirt.

"Jesus," he said, jumping up from the chair. He swore again with the realization the sudden, intense onset of a bloody nose had jolted him from his meditative state.

In the process of ripping a paper towel from the dispenser on the kitchen counter, the doorbell rang. Clutching the towel to his nose, he answered the door. "Sorry, Hayworth, little problem here."

"Good God, man. Here, tip your head back," he said, leading him to the sofa. "Lie back. I know a little about nosebleeds, used to get them all the time as a child."

Frank put his head back and realized he'd sat down on the paddle. He shifted his weight, and with one hand holding the towel, used the other to stuff the instrument between the cushions. Hayworth dashed into the kitchen, grabbed another towel, and exchanged it for the bright red one under Frank's nose.

"Am I supposed to pinch my nostrils?" Frank said, the words echoing inside his head.

"I don't think so. You're supposed to just let it flow and keep your head back."

Almost as suddenly as it had started, the gushing of blood ceased. “Damn, I don’t think I’ve ever had a nosebleed.” Frank kept the towel under his nose and gazed up at Reuben. “Ah, shit, you’ve got blood all over your white shirt.”

“Not a problem,” Hayworth said with a smile. “I brought others.”

Lightheaded, the paper towel still under his nose, Frank staggered to his feet, and stretched his arm out. “Take it off, and let me put it to soak. You’re supposed to do it right away when it’s blood.”

“Really, it’s not a—”

“I insist.”

Hayworth shrugged. “All right, but I’ve had much worse on my shirt, I assure you.”

Frank took the shirt from his hand, put it to soak in the kitchen sink with some Dawn dish soap and motioned for Hayworth to follow him. “My computer is all set up in my bedroom. We can spread the file out on the bed.”

“Suits me, but are you sure you’re up to looking at it? I can return tomorrow.”

“Nah, I’m fine now. Stressful day, I guess.”

Several minutes later, the documents had been sorted by Hayworth into neat little piles. “Everything is here—toxicology and autopsy reports, recent snapshots of the men, and crime scene photos arranged by victim according to the date they were found.”

Kneeling by the bed, Hayworth handed Frank the first set of papers. He flipped through them while standing over Reuben’s shoulders and his knees buckled. “They died from cardiac arrest secondary to drowning?” He searched frantically for the autopsy report. “Jesus, self-induced heroin?”

Hayworth handed him the next pile. “That’s the ME’s findings after all the toxicology reports, tissue samples, and, after examining the heart.” Reuben rubbed his forehead. “Specific gross physical signs from drowning aren’t visible, unless they were strangled or assaulted in another manner.”

“Did they drown or not?”

“Sometimes determining that the victim drowned is difficult, and often another diagnosis arises only through

CROSSROADS REVISITED

exclusion. The circumstances of death are more important than autopsy findings. If there is no evidence of trauma or natural disease to explain the death, and if the victim is found in water, an inexperienced ME might state the death came from drowning in and of itself.

“The reason for the confusion is because few if any pathological findings at autopsy will indicate that the person drowned.” Papers exchanged hands as Hayworth handed Frank the reports on victim number three. “Thank goodness, the ME who worked on the case is one of the top in her field and didn’t assume they died from drowning alone, but conducted extensive toxicology tests.”

“It doesn’t make sense. Five men injected heroin, left the bar of their own volition, walked into the river and drowned?”

“They were alive when they entered that water.”

“How do you know?”

“The heroin injected wasn’t enough to kill them, but incapacitated them, and the rest is complicated, Frank.”

“Try me.”

“If the victim is conscious when he enters the water, he struggles to breathe and this causes a great deal of pressure to the sinuses and the lungs. The ME would expect to find hemorrhaging into the sinuses and airways as well as debris from the water, which is then sucked into the sinuses and lungs while attempting to breathe.”

Frank snorted. “As in bloody nose?”

Hayworth glanced over his shoulder and looked directly at Frank’s nose. “Yes,” he said. Measuring his words he added, “That’s why you had the nosebleed, isn’t it?”

“Bingo.”

“Did you see anything else while you were...”

“No, the pain in my sinuses came sudden and intense. Next, the blood gushed and pulled me out of my meditative state.”

Hayworth handed him a small plastic bag filled with pebbles and algae. “From victim number four, and there’s a similar bag for number five.”

“What does this suggest?”

“That the victims were alive when they went into the water. Plants or rocks from the bottom of the river were found in their

hands—presumptive evidence that they grabbed them during their struggle to survive.”

“And the heart attack occurred next?”

Hayworth nodded again. “They panicked and the heroin in their system didn’t help.”

“You’re the special agent, just lay it out.”

“The heroin injection wasn’t enough to kill them, but would definitely hinder their physical and emotional faculties if placed in a life-threatening situation.”

“So they didn’t have the cardiac arrest from an overdose?”

Hayworth shook his head. “The Medical Examiner doesn’t believe so at this point.”

“And they had the wherewithal to function as long as they weren’t...”

“Dumped into the river.”

“A minute ago you said, ‘the heroin injected.’ You didn’t say *they* injected it.”

“Your prior time as a cop is shining through, McGuire.”

“Yeah, comes from too many interrogations and cherry-picking words.” Frank glanced at his watch and thought about Rand. He should be arriving any minute. “What are we going to tell the parents tomorrow night?”

“I need more time, Frank. We can’t tell them someone injected them with heroin and tossed them into the river. Holy fucking panic would break out, not to mention we’d be alerting the killer.”

“Any suspects?”

“I’m afraid so, and I hate to be the one to break the news to you.”

Frank’s heart thrummed in triple beats. He felt the cloud descend faster than a veil of black satin thrown over his eyes. “I prefer my bad news straight up.”

“I’ve done a little snooping into your past.”

“Why, for Christ sake? Do you suspect me?”

“Of course not,” Hayworth said. “A cautious man by nature, I’d rather know everything about people before I work with them.”

“How did you know I’d work with you on this case?”

CROSSROADS REVISITED

“Once I told you someone of particular interest is involved, I figured you’d come around.”

Frank didn’t say anything, but felt as though someone had siphoned all the blood from his veins.

“Does the name Billy Schumacher mean anything to you?”

“Son of a bitch!” Frank growled, storming to his feet.

“Yep, the man who shot Quinn Brennan during that bank robbery. He escaped two weeks ago from prison and word on the street is he’s here, in Baltimore.”

Frank paced in front of the window. “What else?”

“Since your testimony sent him to prison for life, he’s on a mission.”

“Revenge.”

Hayworth nodded. “You do own a gun, right?”

“A Glock.”

“Good, keep it loaded.” Hayworth handed him a card. “If you even *think* he’s sniffing around, call me at this number 24-7.”

“Right,” Frank said distractedly. *Where the fuck is Rand?*

“If you want my advice, Rand Brennan should return home to live with his mother until this blows over. He’s safer there.”

“Christ, is there anything you people don’t know?”

“Yeah, do you order eggs sunny side up or over easy?”

Chapter Five

Rand headed for home. His heart thundered in his chest and his cock hardened and wept again, even though he'd jerked himself off in the bathroom twice that day. His body a mass of tension and tightly drawn bow strings, he walked up the steps of the townhome and opened the front door. The grandfather clock stroked seven chimes. Good, he still had an hour before Frank arrived. He'd get into the shower and hope the hot, steamy water would pull the tension from his body.

He dropped his backpack onto the table and stopped in his tracks in the hallway. He heard voices from Frank's room, or some type of muffled noise. The door stood ajar. He walked toward it, pushed it open, and his heart fell to his feet.

A man knelt by the bed—a beautiful man, shirtless. Behind him stood Frank. Rand's eyes locked on the blond's dove-gray orbs before meeting Frank's gaze. Anger bubbled up from Rand's chest, and an unidentifiable emotion he couldn't name. Turbulent feelings rushed through him, like sand slipping through his fingers. Frank's words ran through his head like a litany. *I'm not a babysitter. You want to fuck up in school, go ahead, but you'll be back living with your mother quicker than flies mate. And maybe I'll start looking for an honest, mature roommate.*

Rand turned on his heels and stormed from the room, waves of dizziness crashing over him. He hated Frank McGuire. Hated him. A sick dread clawed at his guts. Visions of Frank fucking the man stormed through his mind. The blond pseudo-model would soon be begging and whimpering beneath McGuire's skilled hands, not to mention the other body parts Frank honored him with.

He wouldn't allow Frank to use him again. He'd stay in his room and lock the door. The hell with Frank McGuire. He could

fuck the gray-eyed Greek God into kingdom come and he didn't give a shit.

Rand fell onto the bed with a groan. He'd forgotten about the plug in his ass through all the chaos of walking in on them. Now what? Did Frank expect him to leave it in all night? He rose from bed and double-checked the lock. Yep, locked. He looked at the clock on his nightstand. Seven-thirty. Had the man left or was Frank working his magic on his body? The thought made him sick to his stomach.

Long, miserable minutes later, Rand jerked upright when someone pounded on his door. "Open the door, Rand."

"Go to Hell."

"Open the goddamned door, you fucking little bastard, or I'll break it down."

Panic surged up Rand's throat. Frank never made idle threats. With every ounce of courage he could muster, he screamed, "Fuck you!"

He bolted from bed when Frank kicked the door in. Scrambling into a corner with his back to the wall, he waited for Frank's next move.

His voice level and low, Frank said, "We don't lock doors in this house, unless they're outside doors."

Rand looked at the shattered door. "Guess we don't have to worry about locking that one again."

"You're starting to really piss me off. No, let me correct that," Frank said. "I am pissed off, and I've had it up to here," he brought a flat hand up to his neck, "with this immature bullshit. I had a guest, and you barged in and made a fool out of yourself and of me."

"Some guest," Rand said, emotion hitching his breath.

"When you get your head straight enough to talk to me, I'll be in my room, but don't bring that emotional shit into my space." Frank turned to walk out of the room and stopped. "And my door will not be locked."

Rand waited for a minute and then sat down on the edge of his bed. A torrent of emotions surged through him—anger, jealousy and yes, regret. He knew he was out of control, had jumped to conclusions without knowing why the man was in Frank's room. Shit, what should he do now? He owed Frank an

apology, didn't he? Or maybe Frank owed him one, but neither would happen while he sat in his room brooding.

Rand slid from the edge of the bed, picked his way over the broken door frame and walked toward Frank's room.

Frank put the book he was reading down on the nightstand, picked up his drink, and took a sip. Then he looked up at Rand. "You got something to say?"

Rand shook his head. Whatever he planned to say had dried up in his throat. God, the man was magnificent, sitting there so cool and collective. Rand didn't want to talk right now; he wanted to be in that bed with him—more than anything he'd ever wanted in his life.

"Well, let me make it easy for you then since you don't want to talk." Frank put his drink down. "You got one minute to get those clothes off."

Without pause, Rand unzipped his pants, shoved them down his hips, and kicked them away. He walked to the bed, climbed in beside Frank, and trembled from the heat emanating from the man's eyes.

The boxers came off next and Rand held his gaze, his heart thrumming wildly in his chest. Long moments of silence passed. Frank seemed to struggle with his emotions, and like him, probably warred with hurt, anger and confusion.

"Roll over onto your stomach."

Quivering with expectation and fear, Rand flipped onto his stomach in seconds. Frank slipped a pillow under his hips and secured his hands to the head rails with two of his neckties. He bound his ankles to the foot rails with the same attire, and stretched his legs wide. Rand closed his eyes, unable to dispel the series of thrills shivering through him.

Silence came to the room. Behind him, Frank didn't move for the longest time before reaching for another pillow and stuffing it under his hips. Rand's cock sprang to life. Oh, God, the shame. Dying for release already, and the man hadn't touched him. The restraints tightened when he pulled against them, and he pictured Frank standing there, looking down at his airborne ass. Capable of moving only his hips, he didn't dare twitch an inch. He'd never seen Frank so mad. Undercurrents hissed through the room and a wave of hot desire pedaled

CROSSROADS REVISITED

through his veins, so potent he gasped. Unbearable anxiety swept over him. What would Frank do next?

Frank's weight bore down on the mattress as he positioned himself behind him. "What did I tell you this morning about immature behavior?"

"Why did you fuck that man?" A vision of Frank pounding into the stranger surfaced, and another image of Frank's blue eyes staring at his naked body right now crowded out the first.

Frank's voice rumbled low and deep, shooting another tremor through him. "I don't have to explain to you. What if I fucked him because I wanted to, because he begged me like you're going to beg me?"

Rand couldn't help the groan that came from his mouth.

"You better save those groans. I haven't started yet. Just so you know, I fuck who I want when I want so you might as well get used to it."

"I'm glad you told me, maybe he'll fuck me when you're done with him next time."

Frank yanked his head back. "You even think of letting someone touch you other than me, I swear it will be the biggest mistake of your life." He pulled hard on his hair. "Tell me you understand."

"Ouch! Yes, yes, I heard you."

Frank let go of his hair and resumed his prior position. Rand gasped when he spread his butt cheeks. "You touch that plug today?"

He shook his head. Frank wiggled the toy around as if examining it, causing a shudder to tear through Rand's body.

"You jerk yourself off today? Tell me the truth or I'll have to come around and look at your eyes. I know when you're lying and it won't go good for you if you are."

"Yes." He said it softly.

"Frank pulled the probe half way out and shoved it in again. "Louder, what did you say? How many times did you go into the bathroom and pump yourself off?"

"Yes," he said loudly. "Twice. I jerked off two times."

Frank's laugh mirrored amusement. "In that case, I want to see you come again, twice. Think you're up to it, four times in one day?"

“No, I never came that many times in one day.”

“Oh, you will. On and on until there isn’t an ounce of fluid left in that hot little body. Truth time again. How did it feel having a plug up your insides all day, rubbing against your tight walls, pumping in and out as you walked?”

“Incredible.”

He worked the plug in and out with determination. “You liked it?”

“God, oh, yes.”

“You’re going to reward me tonight. After I’m done making you come all over yourself, you’re going to suck me off and show me how much you liked it.”

“Oh, man.” He pressed his hard on firmly into the mattress.

Frank’s voice grew soft with arousal, Rand recognized the tone. “For someone who locked me out of his bedroom, I’ve never seen a man so eager.”

Rand gasped, consumed by a feeling of bliss when Frank pulled the plug out and traced the rim of his hole with one finger before sliding it in. His thumb applied pressure on his balls and Rand’s pelvis jerked upward.

Little by little, his hole stretched with such incredible sensations, he almost bucked off the bed. The tissues sensitive and swollen from the ass plug, the slightest touch sent rapturous tremors rippling through his groin.

“Stay still.”

He drew a deep breath and willed his body to cease all motion.

Two fingers went in and Rand fought to keep his muscles relaxed, his hips immobile. “Take a deep breath while I stretch that hole wide.”

“Oh, God, that’s enough. I’m stretched.”

“A little more.”

Another image of Frank watching him loomed in Rand’s mind, sending his cock into a lurch.

“Contract your muscles.”

“I can’t. Oh, God, it hurts.”

“It’s going to hurt more now. When I tell you do something, you do it the first time.”

CROSSROADS REVISITED

Frank pulled out for a brief moment and inserted three fingers. "Christ," Rand panted. "I'm stretched to the max, stop."

"Clench your muscles and relax them."

Rand concentrated, contracted his stomach muscles and willed the inside muscles near his groin to tighten.

"Again, do it again and again until I tell you to stop."

Rand didn't dare disobey. Frank would stretch him wider and wider and he'd start whimpering and begging. He clenched his internal muscles, counted off the seconds, and relaxed them. Beyond redemption, and no longer caring whether Frank had fucked a whole tribe of natives, his cock spurted.

"You enjoy that? Turns you on, doesn't it?"

"Oh, you're going to make me come," he heard his own muffled voice sob. "I'm going to explode if you don't stop."

"I want you to come." Frank kept at it with his knowledgeable fingers probing and scraping his inside walls, pushing them in and out with deliberate strokes.

Without warning Rand's cock jerked, the thick cream shooting faster than an exploding star. An animalistic scream tore from his throat, white lights exploded behind his eyelids and his body went rigid. Frank said Rand had almost fainted once from the force of a powerful release, and now it was happening again. Waves of dizziness crashed over him and he lost all sense of time.

"Three times," Frank said. "One more to go. Obviously, that tripped your trigger."

Frank pulled his fingers out and Rand's body tensed again. What would he do next? His breaths came in short, rapid pants and his pelvis sunk into the pillows bracing for the next assault. One couldn't really call it an assault, but rather analogous to fireworks exploding in the sky on the fucking Fourth of July.

"Feel better now?"

Sweat streamed from his forehead. "Why are you doing this? I can't take much more. My ass is sore from that plug and I've shot enough load for a week."

"I know you're sore, and that's the point. I want you to feel every thing tenfold so you'll remember to study every night."

"I will, I promise."

"Your promises don't mean shit anymore."

“Aren’t you going to fuck me?”

“I don’t think I will.”

Shit, he mouthed silently.

“You just said you can’t take much more, so I’m getting mixed messages. Do you want me to or not?”

“Yes,” he whispered. And then louder, “Yes.”

He felt Frank’s cock at his entrance and sighed with relief. How could he possibly want that big boy inside him after all he’d been through today? And yet, he did, more than anything.

“Say it. Tell me you want my cock inside you.”

“I do.”

He pushed it in an inch. “You do what?”

“Want your cock inside me, want you to fuck me.”

“Tell me you acted worse than an immature idiot.”

“Oh, Christ, when?”

“Tonight, when you barged into my bedroom and assumed I fucked another man.”

On the brink of some endless chasm, the words registered slowly. “What? You didn’t fuck him?”

“No, pretty boy, I only fuck you.”

Gooseflesh rose on every inch of his skin. A network of nerve endings from the waist down launched into full alert. He tried to stifle the groans bubbling up from his gut. He felt Frank push in to the hilt and bawled louder than a calf. “Oh, my God.”

“Did you ever think anything could feel so good? Your ass is quivering uncontrollably.” Frank reached underneath his hips and found his cock. Rand couldn’t believe the fire ripping through him so soon. Hot and hard, he panted through a series of ragged breaths. Frank slid his hand up and down his erection, squeezing and milking it while slamming into his ass.

“I want to feel you come. Come on, pretty boy, show me how much you love having your ass fucked.”

Rand felt his hips thrust frenetically. Mindless with pain and pleasure, he left his body and visited some spiritual plane. So close...he was almost there. He cried and begged as the heat shot through him like a maelstrom. Then he begged some more. “Don’t stop, God, please don’t stop.”

The world spun and the ligaments in his body tightened. He felt his groin and abdomen convulse as if a demon from hell took

CROSSROADS REVISITED

hold of his insides with a big hand and stroked some unnamed internal organ. Hoarse, rough cries tore from his throat. Caught up in a tidal wave of heat, Frank's name escaped, and he hated himself for saying it. Over and over it spewed forth and he had no way of stopping it.

He swore, he cried, and bucked like a wild pony. An image of himself spread out with Frank's cock in his ass while the man stroked him rose, sending ripple after ripple of decadent chills down his spine. He bore down and pushed forward with his hips at the same time, writhing and straining like a person in the throes of a fit. He catapulted into climax. Fire ripped through his penis as though someone jammed a hot poker down his slit.

Finally, his cock stopped spurting and he fell into the mattress, his body covered in a thick mist of perspiration. Gasping for air like a fish out of water, dizziness and a lightheaded aura circled around him. Pure, unadulterated bliss rushed over him in giant waves. He'd never felt anything so mind-blowing euphoric.

Vaguely aware of Frank pulling out of his ass, and less aware of Frank untying the ropes at his ankles and wrists, he shrunk into the mattress. Frank pulled the pillows out and Rand curled into a fetal position and passed out from exhaustion.

"Four times," Frank whispered.

Chapter Six

Rand awoke with a shiver. The sheet had slipped to the end of the bed and the curtains on the window flapped in the wind. Reaching for the covers, his hand made contact with a warm body—Frank’s. He snuggled into the warmth.

“You were snoring,” Frank said.

“No shit. I wonder why.”

“You want to talk about my visitor now?”

“I thought you asked him over because you don’t want me to get too attached to you. You’re afraid of that, aren’t you, Frank?”

“Stop. You’re getting in over your head.”

“Okay, Chicken Little.”

Frank drew a deep breath. “Don’t let it go to your head, but I’m not interested in fucking anyone else.”

“You mean that?”

“I said don’t let it go to your head. Now, climb up on my stomach, face toward my cock.”

Eager to please him after that admission, he obeyed immediately.

“Feel how hard I am for you now, pretty boy?”

The moon slipped out from behind a cloud, exposing Frank’s thick, long cock. He could almost see the elongated thick, blue veins running the length of it. The huge, mushroom-shaped tip loomed dark purple.

“Suck it. Show me how much you want me, and spread your legs.”

Rand dropped to his stomach and spread his legs out at Frank’s sides. He took only the head into his mouth and sucked, drawing it through his teeth slowly. Rand’s confidence soared when Frank’s hips arched upward.

CROSSROADS REVISITED

“Swallow it, the whole thing, and suck me harder. When I tell you to stop, you stop, right away.”

Rand sucked greedily, taking the whole length in until it hit the back of his throat. He moaned when Frank took a hold of his balls and pulled his sacs downward and pinched the loose skin. Christ, the man knew every trick in the book, knew how to wring him inside out and back again with all his wicked skills. Rand had a hard time concentrating on the slick, warm penis in his mouth while Frank stretched and tugged on his balls. The man’s cock expanded and hammered in sync with Rand’s heart. Frank’s body tensed and a low growl came from his throat.

Rand stopped briefly. “Like that, Frank? Am I sucking hard enough, too much, what?”

“You’re a hungry little bastard, aren’t you?”

“Rand scraped his teeth over the tip, about to swallow him again when Frank said, “Stop, right now and get on your stomach.”

Rand’s heart skipped a beat.

“Bring your knees up underneath you and leave your hands out at your sides.” Frank reached over and turned the dim lamp on beside the bed, dragging it down toward his ass. Chills ran down Rand’s spine. “Bring those knees in tight and raise your ass up high in the air. Good boy, now tuck your chin down and spread your cheeks.”

“What?”

“You heard me. Grab your cheeks with your hands and open yourself up, all the way.”

A tremor coursed through him. Christ, Frank wanted to watch his cock go in. Rand moved his hands to his butt and spread his cheeks.

“Wider, pull them apart all the way. That’s better. Now you hold them, no matter what. Don’t let go of your ass.”

A finger went in and Rand sucked in a breath. Deadly quiet behind him, Frank worked his finger in and out, rotating it around until Rand thought he’d die from the sensations.

“I’m putting three in you now. Hold still.”

“Oh, God,” he said, when he twisted three fingers in and drove them home.”

Beneath him, his own cock swelled and throbbed. Oh, God, was he going to come again? He didn't think he had anything left to spurt.

"Feel good with three fingers up your ass?" Frank said.

Panting hard, Rand nodded.

"Oh, no. You're not getting off that easy. Say it, tell me how it feels?"

"So fucking good, I can't stand it. I'm so hard again, it's unbelievable," Rand said, stunned over the way his cock begged for release again.

"Don't come until I tell you. I want you to come with my cock inside you."

"Stop fingering me or I'm gonna spurt."

"Your sphincter is rebelling. Relax. I want total submission."

"Please, Frank, fuck me. I can't wait much longer. My penis is leaking all over the place and I'm trying to hold it back, but it wants to spit."

"Hold those cheeks open, I want to see my cock going in."

Frank took his fingers out and Rand felt the tip of his cock at his anal opening. He drew a deep breath and waited for the plunge. He felt the pressure and then the thick head pushed its way in, stretching him wider than he'd ever been. Pain shot through his groin accompanied by an echo of pleasure.

"Yes, yes, oh God, yes," he said, nearly mindless.

Frank pulled the tip out and pushed it in again over and over, without sinking past the head. Rand imagined his deep blue eyes glazed over as he tormented him and watched his own cock slip in and out of his ass.

"You want it, pretty boy? "

He nodded and rubbed his sweaty forehead on the sheets. "Oh, my God, please don't tease me. Shove it all the way in."

Frank took hold of his hips and drove in deep. Rand cried out and clutched the bed sheets, the pleasure blinding him.

Frank rode him harder than a wild stallion, so hard, Rand's body moved forward on the bed and his head met the head rail. He'd pull out almost completely and slam into him. Rand rocked back against him until their balls met. He wanted more. Deeper. Harder. Before long, he begged, cried out, and strained beneath

him like a wild animal caught in a trap. Frank reached around and took his cock in his hand and milked it hard in perfect rhythm with the thrusts of his hips. Low groans came from Frank's throat, something Rand hadn't heard before.

"You have the most exquisite ass. So tight, so warm. No one pleases me like you do, Rand."

Had he called him by name instead of pretty boy? During sex? Rand exploded, his semen shooting into the bed. He lost pace with his breathing as the warm cum spurted from him in an endless stream of thick cream. He felt Frank's release in his ass, hot and thick. Long minutes later, Frank pulled out, and rolled to the side.

Rand pulled the blankets around his chin and scooted to the opposite side. "Stay over there for the rest of the night. I'm dying here."

"I won't touch you," Frank rasped, "but we need to talk."

"About what?"

"A family friend died last night."

He sat up in bed. "Who?"

"Thomas Kincaid."

He lost pace with his breathing again. "Tom? How?"

"Found him in the river this morning."

Rand hesitated, allowing images of Tom to flit through his mind. A gentle, timid child, on more than one occasion Rand had come to his defense. A kid others loved to pick on for no specific reason, just because Tom never stood up for himself. "Who told you?"

"The FBI agent who left his bloody shirt in my sink and made a hasty retreat after you challenged his sexual gender. And your mother."

"Oh, God, poor Martha."

"Yeah, she's not doing well. Funeral is Thursday, but the woman insists on attending the parents' meeting tomorrow night."

"Are you going?"

"Yep, and so are you." Frank rose from bed and returned moments later with one glass of water, the Jack Daniels, and a shot glass. He handed the water to him and filled the shot glass.

Downing it one gulp, he poured another. “Did you personally know the men who died?”

“What do you mean by *personally*?”

Frank sloshed down the second shot. “I don’t mean in that way, although they were gay, weren’t they?”

“I knew Thomas well, the second one, Jamie, as an acquaintance, and the others only in passing at college.” He paused again to think about the one commonality—all gay. “Yes, the word on the street, they were gay.”

“Hmm, seems more than coincidental, huh?”

“You think it’s a gang of gay-haters?”

“I don’t think it’s a gang.”

A knot twisted in his stomach, reminding him of a coiled pit viper about to unfurl. “Why not?”

“No visible signs of trauma. If it was a hate crime, where are the bruises, cuts, blood?”

“You know exactly how they died, don’t you? Apollo from the FBI told you.”

A laugh spewed from Frank’s throat as he filled the shot glass again. “Hayworth is a handsome man.”

“You gonna drink the whole fucking bottle?”

Rand caught himself studying Frank out of the corner of his eyes. Ribbons of moonlight danced through the bedroom, illuminating his broad shoulders, ripped biceps and hard stomach. Common words didn’t begin to describe Frank’s beauty—the magnificent, rugged features and fathomless blue eyes, not to mention the body parts below the sheet.

“I might after the day I had.” Frank opened the drawer on the nightstand and tucked the Glock under his pillow. “I’m going to ask you a question. If ever I needed the truth, it’s now. I’m not mad, I just need it straight up.”

“Did you just put the gun under your pillow?”

“Yeah, one of the reasons I need the truth.”

“Jesus! All right, ask, and then will you tell me what’s going on?”

“Fair enough. To the best of your knowledge, did any of the men who died use heroin?”

CROSSROADS REVISITED

"No! I mean, not that I ever heard. Pre-med students know better than to mess with that drug. First off, they'd be kicked out school if anyone knew, and—"

"The first four were not pre-med students."

"No, but Thomas was, and I know without a doubt he wouldn't use heroin. No way."

"Have you?"

"No!"

"So, five were gay, but attended different schools." It wasn't a question. Frank said it as if talking to himself.

"Your turn. Tell me what that FBI agent told you. How did they die?"

"Cardiac arrest."

"Cardiac arrest at their age...all five?"

"After injecting heroin."

"Tom didn't inject heroin, so stop saying that. I don't care what the man told you. He's wrong."

"He didn't say *they* injected it. He said heroin showed up in their systems."

Rand clutched the sheets, pulled them up to his chin and turned his back on Frank. "I don't want to talk about it anymore, and for the record, I love sleeping in a bed with a loaded Glock aimed at the back of my head." He glanced over his shoulder. "You ever go bonkers when you have those transcendental dreams?"

"No, but if you're worried, I seem to remember a bed in the other room."

Rand smiled. "Oh, no, not on your life. I'm scared shitless now, and I need the big, tough Frank McGuire to protect me from the boogie man."

"You're a smart ass, pretty boy, you know that?"

"Yeah, like someone else I know. Goodnight."

"Goodnight," Frank said, fluffing the pillow under his head, and Rand knew he wanted to make sure the gun remained right where he put it.

Chapter Seven

The atmosphere inside City Hall reminded Rand of his father's funeral. He'd rather be anywhere but here at the moment. He hugged his mom, and next Martha, Tom's mother. Bloodshot eyes filled with tears gazed into his, and the woman looked paler than a milk carton. Rand scanned the crowded room, filled to capacity with grieving and worried parents. The local clergy sat on one side—a priest, their long-time pastor, and some type of offshoot denomination minister in a brown hooded robe and Grecian sandals. Reps from the colleges were present, staff members, deans and several professors.

In the front row, the parents of the victims sat in chairs and wrung their hands, their faces masked by sorrow and hopelessness. Rand's heart went out to them as they watched Jeffords and the FBI agent walk to the podium and arrange their papers.

Jeffords spoke first. "This is Agent Reuben Hayworth from the Washington FBI Bureau. He's here to help us get to the bottom of these tragedies."

"Murders, you mean," a man piped up from the first row.

Jeffords put his hand up. "Let's just take one thing at a time, and maybe tonight we can arrive at a plan."

Hayworth grabbed the podium, offered his condolences to the victim's parents, and opened the floor to questions.

"When are you going to release the autopsy reports?" a woman asked from the middle of the room. "The parents have a right to know how their children died, and what about us—we're on pins and needles wondering whose child is next?"

"I understand, ma'am, and the reports will be released as soon as possible. We're still waiting on a few to come in. The Medical Examiner wants to make sure she has all her bases covered before she puts down a cause of death."

CROSSROADS REVISITED

Martha rose, her face marked by red blotches, heavy bags clearly visible beneath her red-rimmed eyes. “Agent Hayworth, you’ve had time to look over all the reports.” Her chest rose and fell with laborious breaths. “Are you in concurrence with Baltimore’s Police Department? Did my son have too much to drink and walk into the river?”

“At this point, Mrs. Kincaid, that’s all we have. Five dead college students, found in the river after leaving a bar.”

Anger rose in her voice. “How do you explain the severed phone line outside my house?”

“I can’t,” Hayworth said on a sigh. “Pranksters, coincidence, could be any number of reasons.”

Boos and hisses echoed in the room. Rand knew they weren’t buying the dribble from the agent or the Department. Why should they? Too many loose ends. His mom raised her hand. Oh, Christ, she’d ask Frank to take the podium. Beside him, Frank’s body tensed.

“Yes, ma’am. Please introduce yourself and ask away.”

She stood. “Emily Brennan. My late husband, Quinn, served on the force for years.” She looked around the room, her gaze settling on Frank. “We want to hear from Frank McGuire. He went over your reports, and we want to hear what he has to say.”

Hayworth motioned him forward. Frank got up and walked to the front of the room with the grace of a jungle cat. The room fell silent when he took center stage. He cleared his throat, and scanned the crowd as if gathering his thoughts.

“What about it?” a man asked, a father of one of the boys Rand surmised by his position in the front row. “You’re not buying this malarkey, are you, McGuire? You expect us to believe five young college students walked into the Patuxent after a night of binge drinking?”

“It happens all the time,” Frank said. “In the last two years, eighteen college students have disappeared in the Midwest—Minnesota, Wisconsin, Illinois—most found in or near a body of water. Same as you, the parents are convinced there’s a serial killer on the loose, but the FBI has found no concrete evidence of that.

KETA DIABLO

"I've read all the reports in those cases, and like this one, the holes are too big to ignore. In one instance, one of the men called his girlfriend on his cell. Scared shitless and hiding in the bushes, he said someone had followed him from the bar. They found him a day later floating in the Mississippi."

Another chorus of noisy chatter and disgruntled voices resonated in the room.

Frank put his hand up. "Here's what I think we should do for now, and please believe me when I say I know how very difficult it is to sit and wait when you think a killer might be stalking your children."

"We don't think, we know it!" shouted someone from the back of the room.

Frank's head turned toward the voice and the color drained from his face. Rand shifted in the chair and jerked his head back to see who'd spoken. The man had risen to his feet, but it wasn't the speaker who caught Rand's eye—or Frank's apparently. A dark shadow ducked out the entrance of the building, too fast and wily for Rand to make out features, much less a build. He turned to look at Frank again, and knew in an instant he'd recognized whoever had fled faster than a puff of smoke.

"What did you see in those reports?" A woman asked.

"They drowned. Why they drowned, we don't know yet, but Agent Hayworth has promised me that in four days the reports will be released to the public."

"And what if another is killed in the meantime?"

Jeffords interceded. "We've doubled our patrol and called for reinforcements from neighboring counties."

People milled about after the dismal meeting, comforting one another, sharing hugs and small-talk. Frank seemed edgy when he returned to Rand. "We best say goodbye to your mom."

"Who ran through the front door while you were up there?"

"We'll talk about it later."

Rand didn't fancy the tone in his voice or the look in his eyes—a mixture of worry and something he didn't want to think about. The look assimilated the same one Frank used when he thought Rand wasn't looking at him—the I-care-more-about-you-than-I-let-on look. Someone or something had gotten to

CROSSROADS REVISITED

Frank. Rand sensed it, tasted it with every beat of his tremulous heart.

Rand and Frank approached his mother as she said goodbye to Martha. She turned to Rand and hugged him the moment her best friend left the building. "Geez, Mom, you're hugging me as if you'll never see me again."

Tears brimmed in her eyes. "I bet Martha wishes she could hug Thomas right now."

Uncomfortable, Rand changed the subject. "I'm happy you didn't drag Marlow along. She doesn't need to be exposed to all this shit."

"She's home studying for a final...or so she said."

"Rand," Frank said. "Give me a minute alone with your mother."

"Why?"

Frank shot him another look, more like a glare, and easier to identify. Rand kissed his mom on the cheek and headed out the front door. A few people still milled about, but the crowd had thinned. The wind picked up and Rand watched a pile of leaves swirl around in the street. A chill ran down his spine, and not from the wind. He had the distinct feeling somebody watched him with the sight of an eagle. He zipped up his jacket and, trying to act casual, looked around. All clear to the front. He glanced over his shoulder. Nothing. He'd have to do something about his paranoia. All this talk of dead college students fucked with his mind. Out of corner of his eye, he caught the blurred motion of a familiar dark form duck behind an oak. Could it be the same person who only minutes ago left City Hall in a cloud of dust?

Panic surged up his throat. He willed his heart to calm and realized whoever hid behind the tree wouldn't dare to do anything with so many people around. What in the hell did Frank have to talk to his mother about that he couldn't hear? And when would he come out?

About to walk inside again, Frank appeared. "Let's go," he said.

The air sizzled with undercurrents. "What the hell is going on?"

"I'll tell you in the car."

Rand jumped into the passenger seat and buckled in. Frank did the same after slipping behind the wheel and then turned to him. "You have to go stay with your mother for a while."

Rand jerked his body back and felt the pull of the belt on his chest. "What! Why?"

"Because I said so."

He punched the dashboard. "No."

"No?"

"You can't move me around like a piece of fucking furniture, Frank. Tell me why."

"It's safer there."

"Safer from what, goddamn it?"

"Rand, you have to trust me on this. I told your mother we'll be there after we pack your suitcase."

He drew the words out emphatically. "I'm not going home."

"Do not fucking argue with me. It's my townhome and I say who stays and who goes."

He didn't answer right away, but collected his scattered thoughts. "If you send me packing, I'm never coming back."

Frank slammed on the brakes and whipped the Denali to the side of the road. "What did you say?"

Unable to control his anger or the thought of leaving the asshole McGuire, he said through clenched teeth, "You heard me and I mean it. I'm not your plaything. You can't drop me yo-yo style and reel me back in when you want to fuck me."

"We're not going down this road right now."

"I am!" he shrieked. "I can't do this anymore. One minute you're all over me sucking harder than a tick on a dog and the next you're threatening to send me home. So make up your fucking mind. You send me home, I'm not coming back."

Frank reached over with one hand and grabbed the front of his shirt, yanking him so hard, the seatbelt froze. "You do what I say when I say it, got that, pretty boy?"

Rand stared straight ahead.

"When things blow over and I come for you, you'll be so ready to climb back into my bed, I won't have to ask twice."

A lengthy pause ensued while Rand pondered his options, and Frank didn't release his hold. Now or never his mind screamed. If he had to get over Frank —and Christ, it seemed

CROSSROADS REVISITED

he'd have to die first— better to do it now than go through it again and again at Frank's whim. "Don't count on it," he whispered.

"God, you're a stubborn, spoiled idiot," Frank said, and pulled the car away from the curb. "It's for your own good."

"I'm not a child anymore, Frank, and I've had it up to here with you treating me like one. I'm an adult, a man, and if you don't want to acknowledge it, that's your fucking problem. You saw someone at the meeting, someone who scared you shitless."

"If I am scared shitless, it's not for me."

Rand looked over and studied him for a long time as he sped down the interstate. "Jesus, you think *I'm* in danger."

Frank kept his eyes peeled on the road but a muscle in his jaw twitched.

"If they're after me, I won't be safe at home. He...they, could find me there, too."

"He could, but you won't be at home. Your mother, Marlow, and you are moving to a hotel, an obscure, out-of-the-way hotel until this settles down."

"You said *he*."

"Did I?"

"Who is it?"

"Rand, please, let it go for now. I'll take care of it, but I can't if you're there to distract me."

"Tell me who it is or I'm camping outside the townhouse. I don't care if you beat me to death."

Silence met him.

"Stop the car, let me out. I don't want to be with you anymore."

"Billy Schumacher."

Rand's vision blurred and his heart fell to the floorboards. "I'll kill that son of a bitch. What's he doing out of prison?"

"He escaped, and he's in Baltimore."

"It isn't enough he killed my dad, he wants a piece of me now?"

Frank shook his head.

"Who then, who does he want now?" A light went on in Rand's head and a groan fell from his lips. "He wants you,

doesn't he? Your testimony sent him to prison, and now he's coming for you."

Frank pushed the overhead garage door opener and sped into the underground parking lot. He pulled into the reserved spot, unfastened his seatbelt and looked at Rand. "You got five minutes to get your suitcase packed. I'll be waiting here."

Rand unbuckled his seatbelt, pushed the car door open and slammed it so hard the windows rattled. He packed his suitcase in a blind rage, scooping the entire contents from two dresser drawers into the luggage and cramming it shut. His stomach churned and for a minute he wanted to stick his finger down his throat to relieve the nausea.

Frank would make him leave because he knew a showdown loomed on the horizon and he didn't Rand around in case things went awry. Rand zipped the luggage shut, grabbed the handle and left the townhouse. Right now he hated everyone, Billy Schumacher and Frank McGuire equally.

Chapter Eight

Frank counted off the hours, and next the days, and Schumacher didn't show his face. What in hell did the man want, a fucking invitation? He didn't change his routine, went to work at the same time every morning, came home to an empty townhouse every night and slept alone in the big old bed, missing Rand more than he ever imagined he would.

He spoke to Rand every day on the phone, but it didn't pacify his hunger or squelch the hot flames licking through his veins. The sound of his voice sent his cock into permanent state of aching need and a perpetual hard-on. He wondered if Rand felt the same longing and desire. He didn't want to ask him. What would be the point? Until Schumacher made his move, he couldn't see Rand.

Anger and bitterness laced Rand's words, but he remained respectful. Frank couldn't go down that road, either, but expound on the necessity of keeping Emily, Marlow, and him away from whatever danger lurked in phantom shadows. And they were phantom specters, unnamed, unidentifiable enemies.

Frank realized Rand knew it too when he broached the subject during one of their phone conversations. "There's one thing bothering me about all this."

"What's that?" Frank asked.

"I understand why Schumacher is after you, but why would he kill five college students along the way to get to you?"

"I don't know."

"You do," Rand countered quickly. "Schumacher didn't kill them, you just don't know who did."

"No, I don't."

A reel of film running through a projector, images of Rand, naked and beneath him played over and over in his mind. He couldn't remember a day in his life he denied his homosexuality,

but he remembered the day he cursed it. The day Rand looked at him with a longing so deep, so utterly irrefutable, he would have given anything to wave a magic wand and turn himself into a woman or, heaven forbid, a straight dude.

Quinn knew his son well, thank God, and opened the door for Frank, unofficially. "I think Rand is a lot like you," he'd said.

Frank recalled how he'd shriveled in the passenger seat and said, "Oh, yeah, in what way?"

Quinn had given him a sideways smirk with a roll of his eyes.

"You don't know for sure. He's only in his early teens, things could change."

"McGuire, when did you first know?"

Frank recalled wondering at the time why the man seemed so accepting of people, and so goddamn smart. "At a much earlier age than Rand is now."

"I see the way he looks at you, Frank. It's no longer big brother adoration."

"You want me to leave, not come for dinner anymore?"

"Rand is what he is, and so are you. I can't change that, and so I decided to love you both for as long as God's willing."

"Hey, Frank," Rand said, interrupting his thoughts. "You wander off into one of your meditative states?"

"No, sorry, I'm still here. How's it going at the hotel?"

"Oh, Disneyworld all the way. I'm loving it. We're one big happy family in one big happy room."

"I'm sorry about that. I thought it best to find a ramshackle dump on the outskirts of the city."

"Well, you succeeded." Rand blew a long breath. "At least we have cable here."

"You shouldn't be watching cable anyway. How's school going, you bringing your grades up?"

"Anatomy is a bitch. I have a hard time being enthusiastic over cervical sympathetic ganglia or intercondylar eminences."

"You lost me on cervical."

"Yeah, I'm lost, too, and the professor follows a strict Taliban doctrine when it comes to running his class."

Frank laughed. "Oh, he can't be all that bad."

CROSSROADS REVISITED

“Gotta run. Marlow is whining louder than a cat in heat with hunger pangs, and they’re ready to head out to the restaurant.”

“All right, I’ll talk to you tomorrow.”

“Hayworth still around?”

“Stopped by the office yesterday. The final autopsy reports came in and he’s meeting with the parents tomorrow night.”

“The ME still claims they died from drowning and cardiac arrest?”

Frank reeled from the images crashing through his brain and slumped into the lazy-boy. They rushed through at breakneck speed, so fast he caught only brief glimpses of discombobulated body parts. No, not body parts...bones.

“Yes,” he said, biting back a question he wanted to ask Rand, but didn’t have the nerve. Would he come back when this blew over?

“Ask Frank if he wants to join us?” he heard Emily ask.

“Tell your mother I’ll take a rain check, and you best get going before Marlow ends up in a faint.”

Rand hung up the phone and Frank remained in the chair, dizzy from the subconscious messages, his cock harder than a shepherd’s staff.

* * * *

The grandfather clock stroked midnight and woke Frank with a start. He jackknifed up and cocked an ear. The rhythmic tripping of his heart warned him of peril, like it always had. Someone had snuck into the townhouse. A mental picture of Schumacher sitting on the witness stand rushed forth. The same height as Frank, the man didn’t pack much muscle, but the man’s wiles and street-smarts made up for it.

Frank rolled from the La-Z-Boy. He snatched the Glock from the back of his waistband. Billy would be armed, no doubt about it. Quinn’s blue lips and his blood-siphoned face rose before Frank as he held his dying partner in his arms that fateful day at the bank—a routine burglary gone awry because Schumacher needed drug money.

A red hot rage surged up Frank’s throat. It would end, here, now. Another messy problem wiped from the slate. Christ, what

would he do about the other one—the serial killer stalking college kids? Seized by a powerful momentum to force Schumacher into the open, he fired the Glock in the direction of hallway. The ploy worked.

Schumacher came out gun blazing, his face twisted in fury. A bullet whirled by Frank's ear, so close he felt its heat. Frank aimed for his chest and fired one shot. Schumacher jerked back, hit the wall with a resounding thud, and toppled to the carpet in limp noodle form. Frank looked at the ribbons of crimson running down his wall and then down at Billy. The con smiled and pink froth oozed from the corner of his mouth. Frank kicked the man's gun across the room and knelt beside him.

"Ah, it's over," Billy rasped, still smiling. "Finally."

"Anything you want me to tell your family?"

"Yeah." He coughed pink bubbles. "Tell that wife-beating father of mine I'll see him in Hell." Another gurgling cough. "And tell my mother I love her."

Frank closed his eyes, hoping Billy would be gone when he opened them.

A finger touched his thigh. "The boy...I didn't mean to kill his pa."

Frank's blood ran cold. "What boy?"

"Your boy," Billy said with another smile. "He's got 'em now." He groaned. "Took him—took him from that rattrap hotel you set him up in."

A gut-wrenching fear unlike any he'd never known clawed at his gut. "Billy, tell me. Who's got him?"

He shook his head. "Must be the man who kidnapped those other queers, you think, Frank?"

"Now is the time to redeem your soul, make up for killing his father."

His eyes rolled in the sockets. "Fuck you, McGuire."

"Don't you die yet, you son of a bitch," he said, grabbing his shirt. "Tell me who took Rand."

"Do you get off on riddles, McGuire?"

"Riddles? Don't fuck with me, man. He'll kill him like he killed the others, shoot him up with heroin and dump him alive in the river."

"Do you?"

CROSSROADS REVISITED

“Yes, I love riddles.” Frank shook him again. “Tell me a riddle, Billy, whisper it to me.”

“Oh, my God, it hurts. What-what did the doctor say to the tonsil?”

“I don’t know. What did he say?” Frank didn’t know if he choked on the blood or the sick laugh. “Tell me, Billy, what did he say?”

“You’re cute, I think I’d like to take you out.”

Billy’s last breath escaped in a rush and his head rolled to the side. His eyes were open, the same as his mouth. Frank shook him again. “Billy, Billy, tell me who’s got Rand.” Frank ran his hands through his hair and swore. For good measure he cursed again. “Fuck!”

Frank bolted for the coffee table and flipped open his cell. *Answer, Emily, goddamn it, please pick up.*

It went to voice mail. “This is Emily. I’m sorry I can’t come to the phone right now. Please leave a message, and I’ll call you back as soon as possible.”

“Em, pick up the phone. God, please, he’s got Rand.”

Frank took the stairs to the underground level two at a time, jumped behind the wheel of the Denali and barely cleared the garage door speeding out. He dialed Hayworth’s number, driving ninety miles an hour toward the hotel.

The agent’s voice loomed groggy on the other end. “Hayworth.”

“He’s got Rand.”

“McGuire?”

“Meet me at the hotel. Emily Brennan’s not picking up her cell.”

“Right, I’m on my way.”

Adrenaline pumped through his veins, pitching his heart into a frenetic rhythm. A mishmash of impressions crept from the recesses of his brain, the bones again and another object, shiny, long and sharp. “Come on, tell me, what is it? Flash one more time, please just one more time.” Frank took the corner on two wheels and the snapshot blinked on the screen. He cried out, “A saw, okay, I see it. A crosscut saw.”

Hayworth made it to the Inntowner before Frank. Emily rushed into his arms the moment he stepped from his vehicle.

“Rand’s not with you?” She grabbed Frank by the front of his shirt and shook him, her high-pitched hysterics echoing through the air. “He’s not with you? Oh, God. No!”

“Slow down, Em. Back up. Where’s the car, did he go somewhere?”

She shook her head, and when Frank glanced at Marlow, a dazed look shone in her eyes. “Mom and I went into the room after dinner, and Rand said he’d move the car to the back parking lot. He thought it would be less noticeable.” Marlow doubled over and clutched her stomach. “He never came back.”

Frank looked at Hayworth. “It’s not here. I drove through the back lot and the front on my way in.”

A high-pitched wail fell from Em’s lips as she collapsed against Frank’s chest. “He’s got him, oh my God, he took him!”

Frank pushed her from him gently. “Em, listen to me now. This is very important.”

She nodded on a series of sobs.

“Do you know who took him?”

“Not yet, but I’m close. Listen to me now, Emily, concentrate.”

“All right, Frank. I’ll try, but I can’t think straight.”

“On the way here, images of bones appeared and next a saw.”

She shook her head. “My son is gone and you’re talking to me about saws and bones?”

He slapped his forehead. “Yes! That’s it, Emily—sawbones. That’s what they used to call a physician.” Frank nearly danced a jig. “It makes sense, it’s coming to me now.”

“Frank?” she said, drawing her brows together.

“One day, you and I were talking on the phone and someone came to your door.”

A dazed look crossed her eyes.

“A man, a teacher. He brought Rand’s notebook to you; said Rand left it on his desk. Who, Em? What is his name?”

“Oh, God, I can’t think...Doctor something. His anatomy teacher.” She wiped the tears from her face with the back of her hand and shook her head as if to clear it. “Mc-McBride, that’s it, Donald McBride.”

CROSSROADS REVISITED

Hayworth had the phone to his ear, talking some strange code to a central database only the FBI had privy to. Within seconds, he scratched down an address, ripped it off the pad, and handed it Frank.

Frank called out over his shoulder and sprinted toward the Denali. "Send back-up, Hayworth."

"McGuire, wait, I'll ride with you."

"No, you might stop me from killing someone. Call for back up and meet me there."

Chapter Nine

Rand shivered from the cold.

An ether-like odor clung to his nostrils, and his lips tasted sweet when he ran his tongue over them. He recognized the chemical—chloroform. He tried to remember what happened. Hadn't he been parking the car? Yes, he drove to the back lot of the hotel, turned the ignition off, and stepped out of the car. Then what? He couldn't remember what happened next.

A large ceiling fan with bright lights circled overhead. Chilled to the bone, he closed his eyes and wished to Hell someone would turn it off. He wasn't in the car? He attempted to sit up but couldn't move his arms or legs.

Think.

He had to think.

Alarm stabbed through the hazy fog. He turned his head to the left and fear gripped him. His wrists were tied down with leather straps. He tried to move his legs and felt the pull of the restraints around his ankles.

His stomach heaved, not from the aftereffects of chloroform but from raw, potent fear. The serial killer had him. The truth smacked him in the face and ran through every cell in his body.

A form shifted in the corner and walked toward him. The man leaned over his torso, but the bright lights blocked out his features. Rand swallowed, hard.

"Hello, Mr. Brennan."

The voice, so familiar. He'd heard it a hundred times, but his brain couldn't register a name.

"Still watching meadowlarks mate, Rand?"

He blew air through his lips. Chills coursed over him, and next terror. "Doctor McBride."

CROSSROADS REVISITED

“Ah, so now I have your attention. Pity you didn’t listen in class.” McBride placed a tourniquet around his forearm. “Make a fist, please.”

“Why?”

“Because if I stick you outside the vein, the pain will be immense.”

Despite the gravity of the situation, Rand couldn’t stifle the ironic half-chuckle half-sob. “No, you dumb fuck, why are you doing this?”

“That’s of little concern to you.” Anger came sudden, and now his voice sounded like something out of *Night of the Living Dead*. “Make a fist. You must make a fist!” His hands went to his head and he rocked on his heels. “First and foremost, I’m a physician. I’ve taken the Hippocratic Oath. Now make a goddamn fist!”

He thought about Frank and how lucky he’d been to have known him, live with him and love him. Frank wouldn’t tremble in front of this coward. His short life flashed before him like a movie playing out—his father’s smile, his mother’s melodious laugh, his sister’s blue eyes. And Frank’s beautiful face.

“I’ll cut you a deal,” Rand said, resigned to his death. There was no way out now. He’d die like all the others, but for some strange reason he needed to know the why of it. There must be a reason a seemingly sane man like McBride took up the part of a serial killer. Or, was he merely stalling for time, like all who sensed death was imminent?

“I’m not making any deals, you fucking little homo.”

“So we’ve established one important thing. You hate homosexuals.”

“Shut up!”

“Tell me why or stick me.” Rand turned his head and locked eyes with madman. “Do it!”

McBride paced frantically at the end of the gurney. He looked at the ceiling, the floor and talked; nonsensical words Rand couldn’t make out. And a name spilled from his lips, over and over, he chanted a name.

Long minutes later, McBride returned and resumed the same place beside him. “All right.” He spat the words. “You’ll be dead soon, so what does it matter?”

Rand gave him a curt nod and waited.

"They killed David. They killed my son."

"Who killed him?" Rand whispered.

"The homos. Got him hooked on heroin."

Rand closed his eyes briefly and opened them. "You killed five men because David died of an overdose?"

"Don't you speak his name, you filthy little bastard! They deserved to die, like you deserve to die. Oh, the pain." He pressed the fingertips of his hand to his eyes, so hard Rand thought he was going to pluck his eyes out. "You don't understand, could never understand," he rambled, his words tumbling over each other. He pounded his fist on the foot of the stretcher. "Have you ever lost someone you loved more than life?"

"Yes," Rand mumbled, although he doubted McBride heard him.

"David walked into the Mississippi. He didn't mean to. On his way home to me, he lost his way. The drugs, the stinking drugs. That's why." He ran his fingers down his face and wailed. "He'd be a doctor now—with me." He looked at the ceiling and a mournful wail fell from his lips. "We planned it for years, to start a practice together, work side-by-side, take the Oath and save lives."

"So now you take them instead."

McBride slapped him across the face. "Make a goddamn fist!"

Rand drew a deep breath, made peace with his Maker, and clenched his fist. Pain seared his arm when the needle went in and he felt the hot liquid run through his veins. He wondered if dying from drowning came quick. Would he be incapacitated from the drug or would he fight tooth and nail to live? He felt lightheaded and blissful. Alice must have felt similar to this when she tumbled down the hole to Wonderland. Maybe he stood at the Pearly Gates already and didn't know it.

In the back of his mind, he heard a noise. Someone had entered the room. McBride turned abruptly and charged like an enraged bull. Rand lifted his head to see his savior.

His savior and his alone. Frank.

CROSSROADS REVISITED

Bodies rolled and tumbled around the room. Men, groaned, grunted and cursed and Rand floated on a peaceful cloud. Someone knocked the overhead light out. Glass shattered and covered his body in prisms of white, blue and silver. Oh, God! What a sight!

A dull thud reached his ears and a spray of blood flew through the air, showering him with crimson droplets. He turned his head and saw Frank standing over McBride with a baseball bat, smashing the man's skull in. Again and again.

Feebly Rand called out to him. A little louder this time, but the effort took all his strength. Frank stopped the bat in mid-air and turned to him, his eyes burning with the fire of a wild beast's.

"How many times you gonna kill the bastard?" Rand asked, his voice calm and measured.

Frank ran to him and released his legs from the leather straps and next his wrists. "He injected you already?"

"Yeah, I wouldn't have argued about the fist thing had I known."

"What?"

"Never mind. You missed it," Rand said aware of distant sirens blaring in the distance.

"We've got to get you to the hospital now!"

Frank scooped him from the cart as if he weighed no more than a leaf and ran from the room. Outside, red lights flashed and men in uniforms raced toward the house.

"No ambulance?" Frank said to a man rushing toward them.

"Should be here soon," the strange voice said.

"I can't wait. I can get him there quicker myself."

His mind and body floating in outer space, Rand smiled when Frank buckled him into the Denali. "Wow, I'm high, Frank. The world is rushing by—a Ferris Wheel on fast forward."

"Enjoy it while it lasts," he replied sarcastically. "They'll give you something in ER to counteract it."

"Opioid anta—" He slurred the words. "Antagonist"

"Don't talk now, Rand, just relax."

"If I was anymore relaxed I'd shit my pants." Rand looked out the window as the lights sped by. "Frank."

KETA DIABLO

“What?”

“Thought of you while I laid on that gurney. I accepted death, but told myself if I had one more night to live, I’d want to spend it with you.”

“Stupid kid.”

“I’m not a kid anymore, McGuire, wish you’d realize that.”

It seemed forever before he answered. “I realized it a long time ago.”

Chapter Ten

The next morning, Rand went home to his mother's house when they released him from the hospital. The dose McBride administered wouldn't have been fatal, but nevertheless proved too much for Rand's system, and his intolerance for the drug didn't help. A week passed before Rand returned to classes. During that time, Frank called several times to speak with his mother, but never once asked to speak to him.

Misery and despair accompanied Rand wherever he went. He saw Frank's face in the plate glass windows while walking the streets of Baltimore. His deep blue eyes appeared in the orange-yellow flames of the fireplace at night when his mom started a fire. When he closed his eyes in bed, he remembered riding the waves of pure bliss beneath Frank's body and the hoarse cries from his throat as the man brought him to the brink of heaven and back.

He knew Frank hadn't called him because of the careless words he'd tossed at his head before the craziness all came down. He'd gone over their conversation a thousand times, and it always came back to his threat to return to his mother's house for good if Frank sent him packing. He could wait until Hell froze over and Frank wouldn't ask him to return. Proudful bastard.

The situation called for drastic measures by the end of week two. Tired of jacking himself off while Frank's face floated before him, the time for action had come. *Shit or git*, that's what his dad always said. The word *git* when it came to Frank didn't happen to be in his personal dictionary—hadn't been since the day he watched his dad and Frank joust with barbeque utensils in the back yard. Rand had just turned fourteen, and until that day thought of Frank as a beloved brother.

KETA DIABLO

Frank moved like a fine-tuned machine, and with every thrust and parry of the elongated fork in his hand, Rand became unbearably aroused. His stomach tightened and an alien feeling overtook his young body. The sensation so acute, he jumped to his feet and left the backyard, certain if he watched Frank's ripped body much longer, an intricate system of hard muscle and powerful sinews, he'd explode in his jeans.

The shame of his sexual fantasies and adoration for the man became the bane of his existence for the next several years. When his father died and Frank fled the scene shortly thereafter, Rand learned how to hate. He floundered in a world of confusion, drowned in a cesspool of agony, and wondered day after day who or what he was. His questions were answered when Frank returned to his life, and he couldn't imagine one more day without Frank.

Rand grabbed the townhouse key from the hook on the wall in the kitchen and left a note for his mother on the table, *Off to see Frank. Don't worry about me. Love, Rand.*

* * * *

Unlocking the door to the townhouse, Rand walked in and glanced around the familiar setting. God, how he'd missed it. Missed Frank. He walked into the bedroom and rifled through the dresser drawers until he found what he searched for. He slipped the black hood over his face and peered into the mirror above the dresser. A perfect match to the black sweatshirt and matching jeans he'd donned before leaving his mother's house.

Next, he walked to the nightstand and retrieved the Glock. Memories of performing the same routine from his childhood flooded him. How many times had he snuck into his parents' room, pulled his father's gun from the drawer, and held it?

He checked it for ammo and breathed a sigh of relief it wasn't loaded. Not certain how to eject the bullets, his plan would all be for naught if it had been. Frank didn't have to know it wasn't loaded. Maybe he'd forget he'd taken the bullets out.

Now all he had to do was hide in an inconspicuous location. He knew Frank's routine well. He'd come home, drop his

CROSSROADS REVISITED

briefcase onto the kitchen counter, pour a shot of Jack Daniels, and head for his bedroom to change.

Rand snuck into the closet and hunkered down. He couldn't help but laugh at the perverse irony. Finally, he was ready to come out of the closet...in more ways than one.

Less than thirty minutes later, the front door opened. Rand held his breath. The door closed and he heard the briefcase meet the counter. The liquor cabinet door groaned and glasses clanked. Yep, Frank was after the Jack Daniels.

Footsteps echoed softly down the carpeting in the hallway. Soon, Frank would step into the bedroom, glass of whiskey in hand, and plop onto the bed to read the newspaper.

Rand peered through the slats in the closet. Uh-huh, just as predicted. Frank almost flopped onto the bed after setting his drink on the nightstand, then picked up the newspaper and scanned the first page. By the time the closet door squeaked open, Frank was already reaching for the Glock in the nightstand.

"Too late," Rand said.

Frank jerked his body around and put his hand to chest. "Rand? Jesus, why don't you just order a lightning bolt to strike me dead?"

"Too quick of a death for a cold-hearted bastard like you."

"Put the gun down, Rand. This isn't funny."

Rand smiled beneath the hood. He really looked scared shitless. "I'm calling the shots here, McGuire."

"Rand, you're pissing me off. Stop pointing that fucking gun at my chest."

"Take everything off from the waist down."

"Have you lost your fucking mind?"

"Maybe."

"Why in hell would I take my pants off?"

To draw out his anxiety over the loaded gun, Rand walked over to him at a foot-dragging pace. He grabbed a lock of his long hair. "Do I look like I have to explain things to you? I'm the one with the gun now, in case you hadn't noticed."

"You're messing with fire. You don't know the first thing about guns, and didn't your father ever tell you not to point it at anyone, loaded or not?"

“He did,” he said with an air of cockiness. “Apparently I didn’t heed his warnings. Now, you going to drop those jeans or do I have to rip them from your body?”

“What the—”

“I’m going to start counting, and for every second you hesitate, I’m going to give you a lash from my belt.”

“You’re not wearing a belt,” Frank said with a smile.

Rand looked down at his black jeans. “I’ll use yours, now fucking drop ’em. One, two, three...”

“All right, you little bastard. How are you going to get away from me when this sick little game is over? I’m ten times faster than you, and I don’t take kindly to anyone pointing a loaded gun at my body.”

“Do what I say so I don’t get nervous and blow your brains out. Four, five...”

“Okay, okay.” He unzipped his jeans and slid them down his hips.

Rand licked his lips and the gun wobbled in his hands.

“Better hang on to big boy there and quit staring in the direction of my dick.”

“The boxers,” Rand said, raising the gun and his chin.

With an exasperated sigh, Frank snapped the waistband of his boxers and stepped out of them.

“Now lift your shirt up. I want to see if you got a hard on.”

Rand’s eyes widened when Frank’s hard cock stared back at him when the blue shirt cleared his waist.

“Satisfied?”

“No,” Rand said, trying to still his runaway heart. “Sit down on the bed, and scoot backwards against the headboard, hands clasped behind your head.”

Without a word, Frank complied, but rolled his eyes.

Rand walked toward him with the gun still aimed at his chest. “Stick your hand out.”

“Right or left?”

“Doesn’t matter.”

Frank held out his left hand. It didn’t surprise Rand. The hardened cop would never surrender his most useful personal weapon.

CROSSROADS REVISITED

He grabbed something from his back pocket and held it before Frank.

“Handcuffs? Oh, this better be so worth it. Normally, I’d fight to the death before I’d let someone handcuff me.”

“I hope you do, you stubborn jackass,” Rand said, trying to sound stern. “Then I can shatter that frozen heart once and for all.” He fastened the cuff over his wrist, snapped it shut, and hooked the other end to the head rail.

As always, Frank sounded cool as a cucumber. “I love danger and force.”

Rand leaned down and pinched his nipple with his forefinger and thumb, keeping the gun pressed against a spot over his heart. “Oh, yeah, let’s find out what else trips your trigger.”

Blue eyes darkened. “Go ahead, be my guest.”

Rand left his sweatshirt on, but removed his jeans and briefs before he sat on Frank’s pelvis with his knees tucked close to his hips. He ran his hands along his chest and brushed his thumbs over the tough cop’s dark nipples.

Frank’s breathing deepened.

Rand bent his head down and with his tongue and teeth began an arousing dance across his torso, beginning at his navel and ending at his neck. He took his time, licking and sucking in all the sensitive spots and reveling in the subtle gasps Frank tried to conceal. He stroked his shoulders, caressingly him freely. When Frank moved his free hand a smidgeon toward Rand’s hair, he pressed the nozzle of the gun into the smooth skin above his heart.

“I wouldn’t,” Rand whispered. “Don’t move. Stay still.”

The fingers of his free hand brushed over Frank’s lips and they parted with a rush of ragged air. The gesture excited him, emboldening him to reach down and stroke Frank’s engorged member. With his thumb, he circled the tip and smeared the leaking cream down the length of his shaft.

His eyes returned to Frank’s and the look there sent his emotions spiraling out of control. “You’re hot and throbbing with need,” he said, sliding down his body. When Rand cupped his mouth around his cock, Frank’s hips jerked upward. Rand stopped and glanced up at him. “Want me to lick, suck, or

swallow that big boy?" Before Frank had time to answer he added, "Oh, that's right, I'm the one with the gun now and in control. Think I'll just lick the entire length, maybe suck the head, and watch *you* come for a change. Need a hankie?"

"You little prick."

Heady with power, Rand set upon his cock ruthlessly, alternating between nips, sucks, and licks. Within minutes Frank's body trembled and he clutched the sheet with his free hand. Fighting his own arousal, Rand realized, with Frank it was as much about receiving pleasure as giving it.

A low, "yes" drifted down from Frank's lips. And another.

More focused now, Rand took the entire length in his mouth. Lost in a maze of satiny skin, a minute salty taste and the musky scent of pure man, Rand realized too late Frank had taken the gun from him faster than a magician's sleight-of-hand. He froze with McGuire's cock still in his mouth.

Frank put the gun to his neck. "By all means, let's continue this game." His tone hoarse and tinged with desire, he said, "Slide up and sit on my thighs."

"It's not loaded, you know, the gun. I wouldn't have—"

"You think I wouldn't have disarmed you before I let you put those cuffs on me if it was?"

"You knew? All along, you knew?"

Frank nodded. "For the sake of practicality, let's pretend I missed a bullet. You ready to play a little Russian Roulette?"

"No! I hate guns and you know it. I looked. I made sure the bullets were out."

Frank cocked his head. "You sure?"

Rand stammered. "I—I—"

"That's what I thought. Little boys who play with matches generally get burned. Now slide up here, and make it fast."

Rand did as instructed. Within seconds his ass met Frank's thighs, the touch of naked skin against naked skin sent his heart into wild palpitations.

"Lift your hips up and scoot forward an inch or two."

Rand's ass hovered over Frank's cock. He stilled, a sound almost like a pained groan rumbled in his throat from anticipation. Slowly he lowered his bottom until the hot heat of McGuire's penis nudged his entrance. Time slowed and Rand

forgot everything but the blazing need in his body. The sensation choked him as did his snagged breath.

Too turned on to move, lest it be over before it began, he froze. He realized he'd closed his eyes long moments ago and opened them now to look at Frank. Sapphire gems looked into his, but the man didn't move a muscle, didn't draw breath as far as Rand could tell. God, he was magnificent—the rock-hard body, and beautiful face.

Desire whipped around Rand like a lash, flaying every inch of his skin. His body moved, back and forth, up and down, wanting to quench the implacable hunger, but afraid if he did, they wouldn't be able to recapture what they'd lost.

The hot scent of arousal swirled up his nostrils—his, Frank's.

Now or never.

Unconditional surrender or nothing.

“Do it,” Frank ground out.

Rand bore down and took the full length. Stars exploded in his eyes. A strange humming sound came from the back of his throat. He wanted more, needed to feel Frank move inside him.

“Give me the goddamn key,” Frank said.

To Rand his voice sounded as if it came from a distant realm. In a trance he handed it to him, and heard only the click as Frank released the handcuffs and tossed the Glock on the floor.

“I think this is what you want,” he said, cupping Rand's thighs with such strength, he gasped.

He held him firmly, and pushed down, raising his hips up at the same time. Frank lifted him up and sank into him again, using only his hands to guide his thighs. The taking was painful, yet mingled with an undeniable bliss. Rand felt tight around him when Frank was deep inside him. The hot flames licked at his insides with every thrust, growing like a raging inferno until it became impossible for Rand to distinguish between real and imaginary, fire and ice. Frank bucked and he shuddered. Bestial cries tore from Rand's lips when Frank pushed down on his hips. Their bodies moved with intense urgency as Frank gripped him firmly and rocked his body up and down, give and take, groin against groin.

Rand's body launched into a series of tremors. Almost there, almost. With his hands on Frank's chest, and his knees hugging his hips, he threw his head back. "Deeper," he panted. "Harder."

Frank removed one hand from his hip and tore the hood from his face. "Look at me while I fuck you."

The floodgates opened and Rand lost himself in the fathomless depths, surrendered to the way Frank pummeled his body. Give and take, hold and submit. Frank filled him more, in so deep, he moaned his pleasure. His fierce climax exploded, so intense it blinded him. Rand collapsed onto his chest and Frank's strong arms held him through the last shivers of his release.

Long minutes later, Rand rolled off Frank and lay on his back, panting. God, he wished the man would say something, anything. What should he do? Rise from bed and put his jeans on? Slink from the bedroom with his tail between his legs?

"Does your mother know where you are?" he finally asked.

"I left her a note."

"What did you say in the note?"

"Off to Frank's. Don't worry about me. Love you, Rand."

"Do you think you should call her?"

"Why should I call her?"

Frank pulled him into his arms. "I'll call her, how about that, and I'll tell her to stop over in the morning for coffee."

At least he would let him stay for the night. He didn't realize he'd been holding his breath until he released it.

"I'll ask her if she minds tossing your clothes into the suitcase, too."

Rand raised up on an elbow and looked at him. "Is that what you want?"

"Yes," he said. "Undeniably, irrefutably...yes."

Rand laid his head on Frank's chest and closed his eyes. He was home again where he belonged.

About the Author

Keta's passions include watching movies, reading, dabbling in genealogy and metal detecting. She lives in the Midwest on six acres of woodland, a great place to look for underground artifacts. One day, Keta hopes to live in a year-round temperate climate spending every day writing in the great outdoors.