

CORAL

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Contents

Chapter One.....	3
Chapter Two.....	11
Chapter Three.....	21
Chapter Four.....	25
Chapter Five.....	28
Chapter Six.....	34
Chapter Seven.....	36
Chapter Eight.....	39
Chapter Nine.....	52
Chapter Ten.....	56
Chapter Eleven.....	60
Chapter Twelve.....	65

Chapter One

"I think you should keel it," Lieutenant Bond pronounced in his curious blend of Cracker by Southwest accent. "Permission denied. Keel the damned thing."

Kenu didn't kill it. He kept it in a jar with nail holes punched in the lid that rested in the back bottom shelf of his locker when he was asleep and in the button-flapped back pocket of a thick pair of prison-issue khakis when he walked around.

He sat in the shade on the east side of the dormitory one afternoon when a coral snake slowly slithered toward him in the torpor of the Arizona desert heat. It looked like a young one, nine or ten inches long, the thickness of a dime, and colored with the black-yellow-red-yellow-black bands that identified its kind.

Poisonous was an attribute of common currency in the Valley of the Sun. So many creatures required caution that you expected to see them and were startled by their presence only if they surprised you. If you surprised them they were dangerous.

You learned to share the outdoor space, and in many cases indoors too, with several dozen species of scorpions, a dozen types of rattlesnakes, Gila monsters, killer bees, black widow and brown recluse spiders, that large arachnid the tarantula, desert centipedes, the non-poisonous but dangerous Kissing Bug, and the Blister Beetle.

Of them all the most poisonous was the coral snake. Its venom was the same as a cobra, but they lacked fangs and chewed their poison into you. They were shy, so you encountered them rarely if you watched your step. If you ran across them and were careless, they could hurt you badly.

This particular snake, though, was so slow and so unsuspecting that Kenu in that hospitable stretch of shade on a blistering desert day grabbed it just behind its head, held it close and examined it carefully. It was a creature of sere beauty and grace that coiled its

body quickly around his wrist and rather warmed to the touch in a reptilian way of relating. One of god's curious creatures that was an object of Kenu's fascination, deadly and beautiful both, an attraction that demanded caution but lured him, nonetheless.

The prison population were not a sympathetic sort. Many of them at this facility a mere fifty miles from the border were Mexican nationals, mostly drug smugglers, some assorted other foreign criminals, and a few illegal aliens whom the federal authorities found especially offensive for one reason or another.

Atypically there were virtually no black prisoners. Rather, the rest were a mixture of conscientious objectors to the Vietnam War, miscellaneous other white boys caught up in failed drug trafficking, and some Mafia thugs at the end of twenty year beefs who were being readied for release into a deeply changed world from the one they left. It was a typical Federal Prison Camp in 1973 and nobody was rewarded for being friendly.

So the fate of a snake released back into the grounds where all these inmates were housed was likely to be fatal and Kenu wasn't good with that. He asked permission to carry the snake to the outer wall and place it back into the desert.

The prison camp was an oval in a very remote part of the country. There were three dormitories on each of the long sides of the oval, a large dining hall and power complex at the bottom and the entry, administrative offices, and visitor's center at the top. Across from it was a parking lot where visitors disembarked.

There was an athletic field, a large dirt track where running or walking was conducted, a weedy softball field, a concrete basketball court, and a tennis court serrated with large cracks in the asphalt surface where these misbegotten sorts could recreate. It was surrounded by an inner and then an outer perimeter, symbolic walls some four feet high and ten yards apart beyond which one may not go on penalty of being shot dead as an escapee.

Kenu asked permission to take the snake to the far wall and set it free.

"I think you should keel it," Lt. Bond replied. That is what he thought but not what he commanded. Bond was mid-forties, stout, reasonably trim, of moderate intelligence and politic enough to live by go along to get along. As second to the Warden in charge of this facility, he let the hacks below him inflict the harsh responses to daily life in stir.

Kenu kept his head down and went about his business, snake in hand. Well, in his back pocket anyhow. He gave it lots of thought before he adopted this approach to keep the snake with him.

The khaki pants were military grade, thick and fibrous, so this creature would have to chew through a considerable amount of stout fabric before it could bite him. Then too it would reach his butt, which would be no small feat to chew. It seemed to him the snake would be cool as long as he didn't sit on it or otherwise hassled it in any way and fed it regularly, which he did.

That was the hard part. Moths and other insects were pretty easy prey for him and the snake too once he dropped them in the jar. It quickly disposed of them. Larger creatures were a greater challenge. He caught a few mice, lured with stale cookies into a homemade trap, which fed the snake happily. It loved scorpions and ate a few garter snakes too, with undisguised pleasure. Kenu sensed its contentment in his back pocket. Keeping it fed became a daily occupation.

Otherwise, he moved it from the jar to his pocket at sun up and back to the jar in his locker at lights out or various times between. The transfer from one place to the other required that he dropped it on his bunk and grabbed it quickly behind its head, which gave him serious pause at first. The creature was lethal, after all. But it moved slowly enough that he could hold it before it composed itself to strike. Soon enough it was oriented to the daily regimen.

Keeping it from his fellow inmates' hostility was an occupation, too. There was an element of mojo about the entire thing the Mexicans especially found objectionable. They watched him when he came back to the dorm after whatever occupied his day, removed his shoes, then his pants, unbuttoned the back pocket, dropped the sleepy snake on to his bunk and quickly grabbed it, held it with one hand and, while they watched, stroked its head with a gentle finger several times before he dropped the creature in the jar and tucked it away.

They made faces, some discrete and some more obvious, and turned away muttering to themselves and each other. "This is not good," seemed to be the message he couldn't quite hear. Their body language was equal parts menacing and intimidated.

That was one problem. Another was privilege and how you earned it, which was an important marker to the incarcerated and how they viewed their fellow inmates. On arrival at this most recent stop in his imprisonment, Kenu was assigned to the road crew. Each morning at 6:30 immediately after a breakfast of thin coffee and various kinds of gruel, he boarded the back of a flatbed truck lined on each side with wooden benches and covered with a canopy of canvas that reached over the arched ribs of steel to a few feet shy of the bed.

Although it was still cool, the desert heat accelerated toward what midday was somewhere near 120 degrees. By then though, the crew and the three guards worked in the temperate evergreen forest of a nearby mountain range where the purpose of their daily assembly awaited.

For 42 years, inmates with picks, axes, and shovels had been building a road up the side of a mountain for what exact purpose no one knew. A lake somewhere ahead was the rumored destination, but whether that was true and how much farther never was discussed. The objective the guards made clear was to clear the way. On a good day as much as twenty yards was gained. Tomorrow was another day.

Other than lunch, a baloney sandwich on Wonder bread and an apple or orange, and frequent trips to the canteen truck where rusty cups affixed to barrels of water by a length of chain kept dehydration

at bay, the inmates thought about little but whether one preferred pick, axe, or shovel as the role he played. At least the temperature was tolerable and one lunch as he sat off by the side of the road on a rock at the edge of a steep cliff, he looked at something that caught his eye and saw he was a dozen feet or so from a golden eagle perched at the top of a tree. He tossed it the last of his sandwich hoping to see it launch into flight but it merely watched the morsel fall and looked at him with a steely gaze.

After a week, a very large guy named Phil approached him during dinner and said, "Raymond wants to see you." Kenu sensed that asking "who is Raymond?" was not the proper response. He followed Phil through the kitchen and past a boiler and some large electrical equipment to a door where the guy knocked and was told to enter.

They were in a room maybe 30 feet square that held a Queen size bed, a couple of easy chairs, coffee table, television set, desk, typewriter, and a well appointed kitchen. Through an open doorway was a bathroom. Seated in nice chair with his back to the desk was a short, portly, balding man with a smile on his face.

"What kind of name is Kenu?" he said. "Some kinda Jew?"

"Slavic Jew. It's abbreviated but nobody remembers what the full name was."

"But your mother's a paisana, am I right?"

"Gasperetti. From the Val de Non."

"And you're a writer."

"I am. Was. Mostly writing letters now."

"I write poetry myself."

"Really."

"Want to see some?"

He handed Kenu a black looseleaf notebook with a hand-lettered label on the front that said: Poems. They were the Roses are Red

variety, flowery, saccharine, carefully rhymed. He read through the first half dozen, looked up to find the man nearly bobbing in his seat, waiting for the verdict.

"Nice. You got a way with words."

"Yeah? You think so?"

"Yeah," Kenu said.

"Yeah," Phil said with something like relief.

"Where they got you working?" Raymond said.

"Road crew."

"The road's for Beaners. Not for you. Report to the laundry tomorrow at eight."

"Um, okay. Should I tell the hacks?"

"Don't tell nobody nothing. Just be there. They'll be expecting you."

They gave him a job placing clean clothes in the little wooden cubicles where every inmate got fresh laundry. They each had a clean t-shirt, a short-sleeve khaki shirt and pants, socks and underwear twice a week. Those and standard issue shoes - with notched heels for easy tracking if someone made a run for it - were the uniform.

"The new stuff goes in the bins up top," the hack told him. The names on each of them were Italian. The next tier and the one after were Anglo names, too. Further down were Hispanic. "That's where the crap goes."

Sorting the laundry took an hour or so and it came with bennies. Once he got past Raymond and his pals, the next tiers slipped him packs of cigarettes for good clothes, maybe a carton if they expected visitors and wanted a brand new outfit to look their best. The work was cushy and lucrative.

That was privilege and the Mexicans noticed. The most privileged of them cleaned dorms, mopped floors, washed windows, swabbed johns where a hundred inmates a day shit and pissed in a dozen toilets and washed their sweaty bodies in a half-dozen showers. That was privileged work because it was inside where the swamp coolers kept things reasonably cool, so they noticed too while they were on the job that he laid around in his underwear on his bunk reading books at nine o'clock in the morning. That was another problem.

For a while some of them were friendly enough. Everybody with any sense in the joint looked for advantage, and you never knew who might provide it. So it's just good sense to get to know people well enough at least to size them up.

They'd offer a cookie, what they called a chili pepper on a Ritz cracker, and he'd offer a cigarette. They ate, smoked, shot the breeze, and not much came of it one way or the other. The ones on the road crew showed attitude right away when he moved on to the laundry and the ones who cleaned the dorms soon followed suit.

But the jefe and some of the more influential ones among the Mexicans, those in the same dorm as his, stayed on good terms. They angled for better clothes and knew he provided them. Partly too they were privileged themselves and tolerated it in others. And Raymond was a factor. They weren't certain he was protected but always better safe than sorry.

So things deteriorated slowly at first but the snake pushed them toward the edge. Those issues and what happened next brought the difficulty between Kenu and the Mexicans to a dangerous level of animosity.

The incident became far nastier than he intended and reached a flashpoint in an instant. One guy among the crew that cleaned the dorms became more aggressive over a few days. He bumped Kenu's bunk with the push broom and then moved away. Prison etiquette was that you do *not* touch another inmate's stuff, especially his bed. You don't do it. Period.

Once was an accident. Twice was clumsy. The third time was trouble.

"No mas," Kenu said. He shook his head sideways and snarled at the guy. The kid moved on down the aisle between the bunks, clanged the broom every so often against the leg of one of them, then another, with increasing frequency as he returned toward Kenu.

He hit the bunk leg a couple of quick, sharp blows and would have continued if Kenu hadn't leaped up and hit him in the face with three hard punches. The kid hit the floor. One of the other Mexicans came down the aisle, helped him to his feet, and they crept away, not looking back.

Kenu stood by his bunk and watched the pair gather with two more of the crew. They spoke quietly and looked his way. But they left the building and nothing more came of it that morning.

It might have been better if it had. He waited, wondered when or from where they'd hit back at him but he knew they would. The wait was the worst of it. Once the line was crossed, retribution was inevitable. Face has to be saved. Honor demanded it. All that bullshit.

He had to deal with it on his own. Raymond, despite the weight he carried with all the gangsters he commanded, was still vastly outnumbered. He was a strategist and all-out war was not in his best interest. If he was inclined to get involved, and there was no assurance that he would if asked, he'd probably negotiate, might even sacrifice Kenu as a gesture of peace and placation. Who knows? Nobody is untouchable except maybe Raymond himself. Either way, Kenu didn't ask.

Chapter Two

Kashmir! Just the word itself, like an elixir, an intoxication, a place of mystery and immediate attraction where it seemed preordained he would go. Looking at a map, the country that carried the lush, velvety name, tucked in the northwestern end of the long sweep of the Himalayan Range, adjacent to Tibet but still accessible, drew him.

He flew New York to Delhi through London, Paris, Berlin, Rome, Beirut, and Dubai. He stayed one night at the Rajdoot Hotel where a man was stabbed to death outside his window, then several days at the Allah Akbar, luxurious in comparison.

From Delhi he went by train through the Punjab to Pathankot and then by bus through Jammu to Udhampur, Panitop, Banihal, Anantnag and on to Srinagar. They stopped twice for tea and toilet break, lined up side by side, hung their butts over the cliff at the edge of the road and defecated into the abyss. The tea at the caravanserai was savory, the pastries sweet, the camels drowsed, smelling gamey where they lay.

At Srinagar, the passengers were taken to Indian customs at the airport, where the field was ringed with anti-aircraft batteries and Hindu soldiers with carbines stood guard at every doorway. A Royal Nepali plane sat on the runway a distance from the terminal and nearby were two India Airways craft, the larger one a DC-3.

Little attention was paid him and he was waved through after a quick look at his visa. The Muslim passengers were aggressively questioned. A crowd of local men jostled with each other for his attention: "My brother be the cab for you." "My father be the nicest boat." "My cousin get you what you want. Anything."

The Beatles had been here recently. The houseboats bore names like Penny Lane, Strawberry Fields, A Day in the Life. They were beautiful vessels with luxurious rooms of ornately carved wooden walls and ceilings, carpeted with Persian rugs on which was

intricately crafted black walnut furniture cushioned in silks and wool, and windows draped in lace and velvet that framed expansive views.

The dining room seated ten at a crosscut wooden table with lustrous grain and rich patina, and a matched sideboard was stocked with bone China and silver serving trays. Aft were two large bedrooms, the bathroom with a large, high-sided steel tub where he bathed in water heated over a fire on shore, carried aboard by staff and poured gallon by gallon until the tub filled, and a toilet that flushed waste into a closed container that was emptied elsewhere daily.

Forward was an open balcony that spanned the width of the boat. Tea was taken there, hookahs or chillums fired up and hashish smoked, and the view absorbed.

Dal Lake was a deep blue rimmed with tall mountains. Shikaras navigated the vast stretch of water, carrying passengers, food, merchandise, fishermen, who knows what all going about daily life in the Himalayas. Each of them was a dark vessel guided by a hunched pilot silhouetted against the bright sheen of the surface.

Of all the hustlers that approached him, one became the go-to guy. Bashir was short, dark, dressed in a pehran and baggy trousers with an old wool suit coat and skull cap. His English was adequate and his skills at acquisition were excellent.

"The best tea, yes, and pastries, too. For the first meal. Always apples we have and the best rice. Walnuts, too. The paper for, you know, the wiping. Not a problem, I will get for you. Hashish? Yes, with the opium or no?"

In Kashmir, you normally ate with your right hand and wiped your butt with your left. Having the paper made daily life a cleaner, more comfortable activity. The food was very tasty, mostly rice and spinach, nuts, apples, lamb or chicken, and sometimes fish.

The hashish was excellent, too. Opiated or straight from the fields in its thick, tar-like consistency, scraped from the aprons of the workers who walked through dense thickets of plants that oozed their

nectar and yielded magic when the buds were milked. It caked in layers where they wiped it from their hands and was so viscous it had to be mixed with tobacco in the chillums to burn. When it did, inhaled into the lungs, the high was celestial.

The finest shop in the best commercial area of Kashmir was Suffering Moses, an emporium of extraordinary art and craft, merchandise so exquisite, pristine, and plentiful it overwhelmed. Kenu eased through aisles of embroidered silk tapestries, cashmere clothing, pashmina shawls, tall platforms of hand-loomed rugs and carpets, islands of beautifully carved black walnut furniture, material of every make and kind, all of which shimmered with beauty.

He wanted to buy, some of it, all of it, but the prices were high. "Suffering Moses isn't suffering too badly at these prices," he said to a colleague.

From the shadows between columns that supported the roof emerged a man of height and gravity, resplendent in his Khan suit and robe, his face long and lightly bearded, his eyes dark and penetrating, who said quietly but with emphasis, "Suffering Moses suffers to part with things of such beauty."

Once he noted Kenu, Moses, esteemed businessman and citizen of considerable import, wrapped him into his sphere of influence. After a time he was invited to dine at the man's home, an imposing structure of three stories on one of the wider avenues that ran to the river near where it entered the lake.

They sat on plush cushions of lavishly embroidered silk before a low table that sprawled across the center of a large room. Tray after tray of sumptuous food appeared at the table.

"We begin this Kashmiri meal with Thunkpa," Moses said, "a soup we borrow from the Tibetans but make our own, you see. Some say our spices are superior."

It was noodle soup of vegetables and slivers of roasted lamb, red chilis, and black cumin in a clear broth served with a browned flatbread called Khambir and pink tea. A young man presented the

food with subtle, graceful gestures and stood aside, waiting for approval.

"My second son," Moses said, extending his arm and smiling at Kenu. "Mamed, please continue." His son bowed to his father, then to the guest, and departed. He returned with a bowl of Momos, dumplings of chicken and vegetables spiced with classic Kashmiri infusion of garlic, cilantro, chili powder and turmeric. It was served with tea of water, salt, yak butter and tea leaves nearer rich soup in consistency and warmth.

"We invite many pauses in these humble meals," his host advised. "To rest, savor each dish, smoke, and converse. The tobacco relaxes and the hashish stimulates both the appetite and the conversation. Isn't it so? There is no hurry when a guest such as you honors our home."

He asked Kenu about himself, his home, family, business. They smoked strong black tobacco laced with hashish from the hookah and sipped a Darjeeling tea.

After a pause, Mamed returned with finger bowls of lemon water and moist towels lightly heated, which refreshed their faces and cleansed their hands. The towels were removed and replaced with several traditional dishes in earthen bowls carried on a single tray that dwarfed the server.

Powerful fragrances rose into the room; a compelling bouquet stirred anew an appetite in Kenu that before was sated. A dish called Baingan, plump aubergines simmered in a rich sauce with fennel and ginger, accompanied by a fish stew of trout with tamarind, whole green peppers, softened radish, and a Persian spice called asafoetida.

"This is Muji Gaad" Moses said. "It complements the dishes to come."

Again, they paused to sip their tea and smoke from the imposing hookah, which stood some three feet in height, held a half-dozen stems, each with ivory mouthpiece, and a silver bowl embossed with a tiger and an antelope.

The conversation ranged from America in Vietnam to the price of British and Italian automobiles to the creation of Bangladesh. The Hindu domination of Kashmir was oblique and ambiguous when it was mentioned.

"The knives of our butchers have serial numbers, as do the little hooked knives of the rug weavers. Tie a knot, cut the wool, tie another, on and on. Cleave the meat from the bone, the ribs from the carcass, trim the fat from the roast. But if asked you must produce your weapon for inspection. All of them must be present and the numbers must match. Pity the man who dares discard a broken blade. Ha!"

Only a citizen of his stature could make statements so bold. Moses was wily, never needlessly direct, always left room for a more generous, less damning interpretation of his observations.

Another wave of dishes appeared, spices scented the room and Kenu surprised himself with appetite for more. Reverence showed in the manner it was served.

"The curry is Rogan Josh, a traditional food of Kashmir, where we love our lamb well spiced and tender. With it, we have Dum Olav, a favorite of mine because of my fondness for potatoes," he said, patting his girth and smiling.

"The special dish among this modest offering is Goshtaba. You honor us with your presence and we make for you 'the Dish of Kings.' Please do not be intimidated by such a name. It is meant to entice distinguished people to return to our humble home. For the name, I myself have eaten it many times and still I am not royalty."

The meatballs of minced mutton and onions were rich with cinnamon, cloves, and cardamom soothed by a gravy of yoghurt and ginger. The sumptuous cuisine was crowned by this dish. Kenu ate more than he thought possible and savored every bite.

The conversation continued between courses. Moses became more acute if yet deliberate in his discussion. He opened doorways a crack, showed the view from a window, hinted at deeper glimpses of

Kashmiri life if one saw the landscape with clarity and what the shadows held.

"Our Indian overseers of course have our best interests at heart. How else to explain that Kashmiri rice leaves Srinagar at a price of twenty rupees a kilo and sells in Delhi for two hundred. Perhaps the price of transportation is the cause?

"The Hindi assure that our products are valued by the consumer in ever greater measure than the price they bring the Muslim merchant here. We are increasingly valued at a distance, you see, which is better I suppose than not at all."

Kenu glanced at his watch. Four hours they had dined and talked. It was a remarkable evening that taught him the distinct pleasure of Kashmiri cuisine and the discreet nature of political discourse.

"As you know, the saffron that graces our valley is a source of pride. It is more valuable than gold in the marketplace. To our palettes, it is richer still. These cakes are Sheermal, a simple bread infused with that exquisite spice that concludes our meal. It is my greatest wish that you've enjoyed yourself."

The cakes were round patties crusty on the outside with a soft center that freed the scent of saffron with each bite and layered Kenu's nostrils with the dehiscence of a thousand crocus threads. The tea served with it was Kahva, a blend of cinnamon, cardamom, and almonds, with another touch of saffron to be certain the elixir was noted.

Late in the evening, the food mostly consumed before what remained was returned to the kitchen to feed the help, the tea drunk, the bowl of the hookah in ashes, an honor rare and unexpected was paid. The wives and daughters of Suffering Moses appeared at the doorway, one above the next blushing and giggling as they peered around the edge of the wall. Moses extended an arm toward them and permitted his guest a brief look at the partially veiled faces of the women who served him.

One afternoon a few days later Moses took him to a shed where the rugs were woven. Two rows of weavers knelt before the looms with skeins of woolen yarn in a dozen colors on racks above their heads that trailed strands to near their shoulders. The room was dimly lit but as his eyes adjusted Kenu saw the rugs created.

To the side was an old man with a hookah who sang a song from a placid face with sightless eyes. His litany was a recitation of colors pulled from the skeins, knotted to the warp on the loom, and cut with short, curved knives to form the pile. As the song progressed, the historic pattern of the rug was shaped, a different song for each.

Bashir arranged for transport. "My uncle, he will drive you." The destination was Sopore, about 40 kilometers north of town. The first half of the drive was uneventful; thereafter, they were stopped at checkpoints by Hindi guards three times at distances only a few miles apart.

At the first stop, words were exchanged, papers were examined, there was some standing around by the driver and the guards. After a half hour passed, Kenu asked the driver quietly, "Would baksheesh be good?" He merely nodded, took a 500 rupee note, the guard palmed it, and waved them through.

The next two stops were quicker. He handed the driver another note as they approached the checkpoint. Papers were examined, the guard took the money, the barrier lifted, and they drove on.

In a lush valley above the Jhelum River where it entered Wular Lake between thick groves of walnut trees densely planted Indica bushes flourished. He parlayed with the man in charge, paid him an advance of 100,000 rupees, and contracted for delivery of 80 kilos of opiated hashish in Srinagar for the additional payment of 200,000 rupees in sixty days.

Now he had two months to wait. He visited the Gardens of Shalimar several times, each of them more sublime than the last. Maybe the hash was getting better. Maybe he was simply more comfortable.

The terraced splendor of Nur Jahan's creation rolled from the hillside down to the lake and everywhere he looked was exquisite. Roses, shrubs, waterways and fountains, towering mountains and cloud-laced sky of brilliant blue. Verdant remnants of the Mughal Empire for his personal pleasure.

He flew to Delhi, then to Bombay and took a long road trip to Goa, where friends frolicked in the surf and hunkered down at night in twos and threes and fours in huts hard by the beach. There were cobras in the bush nearby and mysticism in the air.

He met Jean-Jacques there, a charming rogue with glistening eyes, a shaggy beard and lithe body clothed in the traditional kurta. He was one of the Fourth Way people, follower of Gurdjieff, reader of Ouspensky, deserter from the Israeli army.

They became fast friends for a while, J-J being a dynamic and magnetic type who set a pace others were somehow compelled to match. "The cows, they are so beautiful," he said, watching as the Brahmas wandered in and out of restaurants and hotel lobbies, dipped their drooling snouts into people's platters of food, rooted around with their leathery tongues in bowls of spinach and rice, or cereals floating in cream, slobbered into the laps of the hapless people seated there who dared not interfere. "They're holy because they are so gentle," he proclaimed with a beatific smile.

"There is a book we must locate," he said one afternoon. "Be ready to set out tomorrow morning. You will see the country as it's meant to be seen."

They trekked for a month from one desolate village to another, slept wherever they could find shelter, ate whatever was at hand, and walked, walked, walked in the stifling heat, searching every bookstore to no avail.

"This is the Fourth Way," he said. "Fakir, Monk, Yogi, each of them has a way. And we can see them everywhere around us. But this is the Fourth Way, one that incorporates those truths and builds an even deeper consciousness, one that seeks to be always awake. It is so

that we can deal with all the eventualities that life presents. That is our goal. To be competent. The challenge is to awaken."

"And this book we're looking for?" Kenu asked him. "It's important why?"

"Because I have not read it and my teacher tells me that I should."

"What's it called again? Who wrote it?"

"Robert S. de Ropp is the author. It is called The Master Game."

They walked a long way through the countryside of India with the best of intentions and the bliss of innocence. But in the largest English-speaking population in the world, they never found the book.

Back in Goa, just before they parted, J-J said, "One month from now I will meet you in Delhi. Let's say at the Ali Akbar. Before you ship your hashish, you should work with me."

"Hashish?" Kenu said. "Did I say anything about hashish?"

"My friend," J-J said with a knowing smile, "every Westerner in India is here on a spirit quest. For many of us, it's a cover for smuggling. The professionals are dealing gold or opium. That is serious shit. We are just the innocents. Our quest is sincere. That doesn't mean we aren't in business. Everybody knows it. Don't be surprised."

He was back in Delhi, arranging for a shipping agent, shacking for a time with a leggy, henna-haired Canadian woman who was gorgeous. Unfortunately, she was probably diseased, as well. She travelled overland from Greece through Turkey, Iran, and Afghanistan to India. On a bus when she first arrived in Afghanistan she was raped by two men. The driver ignored her cries for help, as did the other passengers.

When they arrived in Herat, her fellow passengers avoided her with hostile glances over their shoulder as they hurried away. The men loitered nearby, held hands, and smirked.

She found her way to the police station and reported the two men and the driver. The clerk called in the sheriff, who listened to her story very carefully and took notes as she spoke.

When she finished, the sheriff raped her. When he finished, the clerk raped her, too. They put her out on the street with a lot of shouting, notified the people nearby that she was a Western harlot who should be shunned. She traveled on to Kabul, which was no better.

At the hostel where she stayed the desk clerk appeared at her bedside in the middle of the night. He held a large blade to her throat and raped her. She reported him to authorities the next morning but the hostel owner claimed to know of no such person who worked for him.

In Delhi, she cornered Kenu at the Red Fort and asked his help. They saw a doctor who gave her a strong injection and a large bottle of antibiotics. They shared a bed at the hotel but nothing more intimate than holding hands.

Jean-Jacques arrived on schedule, very business-like except for his efforts to charm the woman. When Kenu next saw them a few weeks later, they were shacking.

J-J was very insistent on the arrangements he made for shipping valuable goods back to America. "Trust me," he said, "this is my business. I know who to pay and how much it takes. It will save you so much work and guarantee your success. A distinguished gentleman shipping precious art to his gallery. It must and will be treated with kid gloves, is that the saying? The cost to you is little for the value you receive."

His service was from Delhi to the custom broker in the States. He needed now to advise him of the shipping date and the invoice. More immediately, he had to get the goods from Srinagar to Delhi, something he'd been considering.

Chapter Three

November in Kashmir became forbidding. The harvest was taken in, the herds of sheep and goats brought down from their summer pastures and with them the chill descended from the higher mountains into the valleys. The Pir Panjal range is 10,000 feet in elevation, but higher mountains in the Himalayas attracted fierce storms and spread them to the lower ranges.

Nestled in the valley of the Jhelum at a mile or so above sea level, Srinagar was a harsh place to brave the elements for those who weren't well situated. An unspoken truth was that many people starved here and many others froze to death because they were unprotected when the cold came.

Kenu made another trip to Sopore to be certain the goods were harvested and ready to ship. All was well. The overseer said, "I will see you next week in the city."

The last time he was there, Kenu spoke with an old lady about jewelry or other treasures he might purchase. She had only shrugged and smiled. Now she called to him, waved him over, sat on a carpet in the dirt and opened a small trunk.

From it she took an exquisite necklace some two feet in length of coral and turquoise. The stones alternated in graduated scale from small round beads near the clasp at the neck to large discs at the chest to two huge turquoise nuggets on either side of a piece of coral the size and shape of an egg at the abdomen, all hand-carved and drilled. The coral was a brilliant red-orange, Paleozoic, from before the mountains replaced the sea. The turquoise was aquamarine in color and veined with limonitic matrix.

Next she brought out a skull cup of human bone, said to be from the head of a Tibetan lama, which was set in a silver shrouded mold. With it was a prayer wheel, a silver dorje, and a prayer bell. These were simple Buddhist implements of obvious age and provenance.

There were several items of embroidered silk, sashes, shawls, a pillow to which was affixed a group of beautifully crafted gold rings. A small purse held a collection of gold and silver jewelry, bracelets, earrings, necklaces, and amulets.

Finally, she lifted from the bottom of the trunk a heavy piece of silk. When it was fully opened up, Kenu saw a tapestry of five colors of silk yarn interwoven with solid gold thread in a field eight feet square. It was breathtaking. A stunning piece of weaving illuminated with gold offered him by a weathered woman in the shade of an ancient tree. The piece de resistance of her trousseau, no doubt, and he was humbled.

The overseer joined them. "Can you ask her how much she wants for these goods?" "50,000 rupees," he said. She looked at him with curiosity, wondering no doubt what he would make of such an imposing sum. He smiled at her and said to the man, "Please ask her if she will accept 100,000 rupees with my sincere thanks."

He dined with Moses one more time. The merchant had another package of merchandise to sell him. "These are very special pieces from Tibet. From the oldest lamaseries. Precious things they wish to spare from the Chinese. They want to see them in America. That is where they hope the new Buddhism will take root."

There were ancient thangkas glazed with the smoke of butter lanterns, jewelry of coral, turquoise, and silver, and several statues of the Buddha in gold. "These you must handle with care. They are not for sale. The rest is yours for a modest fee. But these statues go to contacts in the States and Canada. Do you agree?"

Later in the evening, after a sumptuous meal, Kenu asked about Bashir. "Why, has he bothered you?" Moses asked.

"Oh, no, not at all. He's a fine young man. He's been very helpful. But the nights are growing cold and he seems to have nowhere to go. What will happen to him?"

Moses looked at him, his eyes penetrating, then looked away, shrugged his shoulders, shook his head sideways, and sighed. It was so. There was nothing to do.

He thought Bashir to be perhaps twenty-five. It was hard to guess his age. He had an ageless quality about him charged with youthful energy. Because he wanted to do something for him, perhaps support a business that might see him through the winter, he finally asked. "I be's twelve years," Bashir told him.

Kenu was staggered. This young man was a child, an enterprising one but still a child. Despite his street smarts, he was vulnerable, a statistic if anyone bothered to keep them pending the coming winter's hostility.

He made inquiries in town, learned of a space that could be leased for two years, a simple room in a row of commercial enterprises housed in a building that stretched a block long. This like many of the others was a deep rectangle with a stove, cushions, and a metal door that covered the entire front of the shop when it was closed. A place to do business, probably a teahouse, and a place to sleep. The price was \$125 American dollars per year but paid in advance was two years for \$200.

He took Bashir there and handed him the key. The boy was speechless, looked at the space, at Kenu, at his feet when he began to sob. The price of salvation.

Black walnut was a hard and heavy material from which beautiful furniture was made. For Kenu, four large trunks of exquisitely carved wood were constructed. They were made from an outer and inner layer that were exceptionally thin. Within the walls of each trunk were flat-pressed slabs of 20 kilos of hashish sealed in plastic wrap.

Each trunk contained a treasure of art and artifacts, tapestries, weavings, fine silks and pashmina, thangkas rolled neatly, pockets of jewelry, which in total weighed not all that much. Including their contraband, they were 75 or 80 pounds each.

The night before he left Srinagar, Jean-Jacques gathered him for a departure ceremony. Three monks with stringed instruments, one with a drum, and an ancient blind monk who sang entertained them. And then some.

The music was ethereal. No better word described it. Melodies and rhythms unwound hypnotically through the night like undulating waves of sound across a vast space where they were suspended in time. These five holy men were attuned to a place beyond earthly reserve, each of them with every stroke of the strings, reverberation of the drum, distanced the room from reality.

At times through the night, the singer, who was treated with great respect and deference by the other monks, drew from a small pocket deep in his robes a bag of white hashish pollen they shared from the hookah with transcendent results. A long evening passed into dawn without a break in the music or the mesmerized state of near hypnosis it evoked. Time deep in a holy place heard and felt as it was revealed.

Chapter Four

The trunks were loaded on top of the bus, secured in stout crates that become the base for lots of other baggage. Inside, every seat was taken by people buried in boxes and bags, small cages and crates that held chickens and other unidentified creatures, and on one lap even a small goat. Kenu was the only Westerner of the passengers. He leaned into the inside seat, his head rested on a folded jacket against the window and fell fast asleep.

He was aware of the motion, the sounds of conversation and animals, smells that arose, the old man who fidgeted beside him. Still he slept in a state of semi-consciousness until a sharp banging jarred him fully awake.

The bus was stopped in a dark place beside the road. Outside the window a soldier hit the butt of his rifle against the window, motioned that Kenu should come to him. Now!

The other passengers looked at him from beneath hooded eyes as he made his way down the aisle toward the door. Even the animals seemed hushed. All was still.

Not so when he exited the bus. A soldier grabbed him by the arm and walked him to the one who had banged on the window. He yelled at Kenu in Punjabi and gestured at the top of the bus. Kenu shook his head, raised his arms from the waist palms up, said, "I don't understand you. Who speaks English here?"

The soldier continued to yell and point at the top of the bus; Kenu continued to say, "Who here speaks English" and looked at the crowd of soldiers who gathered, none of whom showed any sign of brokering the standoff. Every time the soldier yelled at him, Kenu said, calmly, "I don't understand," and after a while added, "You dumb fuck."

Finally, a smartly dressed soldier emerged from the crowd, which parted as he approached. He waved the belligerent soldier

aside, smiled gently at Kenu and said, "I am Captain Kortu. As you see, I do speak English and with your cooperation we can straighten out this matter."

"That's a relief, Captain. That other fellow was incredibly unpleasant."

"The one you call 'dumb fuck'? Yes, he can be unpleasant, it is true. It is perhaps unkind of you to call him that, but it is also true he *is* a dumb fuck. These are poor and uneducated people, sir, who understand only the rifle and the rules it enforces."

"What rules have caused a problem, Captain? Perhaps if I knew the issue I could relieve his concern."

"We need to examine the crates there, which I'm told belong to you. Can you please bring them down?"

"Bring them down? Excuse me, Captain, but you must be kidding. It took several strong men to get them up there. If you want to examine them, you can have your men bring them down. Carefully. They are valuable trunks full of very expensive art, which I purchased in Srinagar and am shipping to the States, to my art gallery. If anything is damaged, I will have to hold you responsible. Are we agreed?"

Kortu smiled at him, his gaze steady as he assessed Kenu's composure, and then he smiled, raised a hand palm forward in placation, said, "Perhaps a compromise. If you will allow me to confirm your statement by opening a single trunk, we can be done with this matter. You may accompany me if you wish to assure nothing is damaged or stolen. The key if I may?"

Kenu handed him the key and followed him up the metal ladder at the back of the bus. Things were cleared away from one of the crates, which Kortu looked at carefully before he opened the padlock. He picked at something on the lid of the trunk, looked at it closely, tossed it aside, closed the crate and secured the lock.

"A mistake has been made, for which I apologize," he said, and returned the key. "We are always watching for smugglers. Someone has been arrested for that crime and my men thought perhaps you were implicated, as well. Those grains of rice had fallen into that crate, but it is obvious they came from elsewhere."

"Rice?" Kenu said.

"Oh, yes, rice. It is a very big problem. The smugglers carry it from Kashmir to Delhi and make an obscene profit."

"I had no idea."

"Of course not, and I'm so sorry to have troubled you. The bag of rice obviously leaked into that crate. My men had no way of knowing you were not involved. To me it's clear that one does not smuggle rice in beautiful walnut cases. Again, my apologies."

"Well, I'm relieved we were able to clear that up. Can I be going now?"

"The busman must repack the items we disturbed. Then you'll be on your way. Meanwhile, may I show you how we deal with the smugglers?"

Kortu led him to a place near where the bus was parked. His lantern showed the way through the dark night. They came to the side of a hill, a place where two soldiers stepped aside and Kortu held the lantern close to the ground for a better view.

In the slope of the earth was a gate of heavy bars with a latch secured to a circle of metal embedded in a cement pad. After a moment, Kenu realized that beneath the gate there were two men huddled in fetal position in a hole in the ground.

"These two will not be continuing on your trip," Kortu said. "They will not be going anywhere for a quite long while. Trafficking in rice is not condoned here. And we treat them harshly. Smugglers are shown no mercy, I'm afraid. It is their lot to suffer."

Chapter Five

The train for Delhi departed Pathankot precisely at 10:22 p.m. Because of the delay outside Jammu, the bus arrived at 11:00 p.m. As always in these places crowds of hustlers met the bus. Despite the late arrival they were thick when it pulled in.

Sikhs in their turbans communicated only by shouting, it seemed. They were tall, severe, and commanding in the kurta and cotton trousers beneath the long coat called a choghah. It was cinched to the hip by a sash that held the kirpan, a lethal looking, highly stylized sword that represented the wearer's commitment to fight injustice. Whether or not it was intended, their presence was belligerent and aggressive. After the bus trip and the encounter with the soldiers late this evening Kenu was intimidated.

Getting the crates unloaded and taken to a room he let cost Kenu some of the rupees intended for the train. A team of eight men, assembled who knows how by the man Kenu designated, transported the crates to a nearby inn. The leader said in clear, emphatic English, "We are done here now. We return tomorrow in time to load the train, yes?" "Please," Kenu said, and paid him the agreed upon price.

The room was squalid, windowless, the toilet a hole in the floor from which strange-looking bugs came and went. The smell was suffocating. The bed was a cot stained by rancid sweat, soaked with urine, and crawling with vermin. He arranged the trunks in a rectangle against the door, unrolled his sleeping bag, and slept fitfully on top of his treasure until dawn.

He was up with the sun. The bugs seemed to be sleeping. He spoke to the desk clerk about his room. A man to stand guard. How much? A Sikh gentleman appeared. He was large, immaculately dressed, fierce-looking, and like all the Sikhs armed with both sword and dagger. The palaver between them in Punjabi translated in English to 500 rupees each.

"This man is honorable?" Kenu asked them before paying.

The Sikh partially withdrew his dagger. "One who questioned my honor quickly would be dead," he said with guttural force. Kenu paid, led him to the door, showed him the trunks, said, "Please see no one enters but you and me."

"It shall be done," he said, crossed his arms, and stood tall. Kenu left him, went to the nearest teahouse, fed himself, and waited for the bank to open. From what he saw there was a single Bank of India in town. Even closed, two large Hindu guards with carbines manned the door. Kenu had only 2000 rupees left and the train fare was more than that. After he paid the bearers to carry the crates back to the station and load them for him, he'd be well short of what he needed.

At precisely 9:00 a.m. the door to the bank was opened, the guards stood a little taller, and he entered. It was a small lobby with two tellers behind caged windows with a little depression in the counter below the bars where transactions could be effected. To one side was a door to an office, he assumed. Next to it was another Hindu soldier, his carbine held across his chest. Kenu approached him.

"I need to see the manager," he said. The soldier shook his head and pointed to the tellers. Kenu pointed to the door. "It is official business only for the manager," he said. The soldier stared at him for a long moment, thought his way to his next move. He pointed to a nearby bench, gestured forcefully. "The manager!" Kenu said again, turned to the bench, and sat.

The guard knocked quietly and after a pause, a small flap in the door opened and words were exchanged. The guard looked at Kenu again, said something through the chute, then stepped away. The door opened and a short man in a well-cut suit and tie approached him.

"May I be of service to you?" he said. He didn't quite bow but more than nodded his greeting. "I am the manager of the bank."

"It is a matter of confidentiality. Might we use your office?"

The man looked at him carefully, his measure taken with intelligent eyes in a face set with a modest smile. "If you will kindly follow me," he said.

The office was wood and leather, modest but comfortable and by local standards rather imposing. "My name is Sidney Rajneesh," he said, and extended his hand in a Western gesture.

"A coincidence," Kenu said. "I am Sidney Kenu." They shook hands.

The manager smiled his professional smile, made nothing of their shared name, and said, "May I ask what it is that requires privacy?"

"I arrived too late for last night's train to Delhi. With my expenses staying here, I've run short of rupees and need to exchange American dollars."

"Either of our tellers can quote you today's rate, sir. You don't need my approval."

Kenu reached into his pocket and withdrew a bill. "This is all I have to exchange," he said and held it for Rajneesh to see. It was a \$100 bill.

The manager looked at the bill, then at Kenu. "That is a denomination we don't often see in our little town," he said. "I'm not certain it's a transaction we can handle."

Kenu smiled at him, nodded in sympathy, said, "I do recognize the difficulty. Because I'm an honest man, I prefer not to do business with the black market money changers, so I've come to you."

"You are wise," Rajneesh said. "The money changers quote much higher rates but often leave you nothing except injured when they rob you. Even kill sometimes, sad to say. Legal is always better."

"My sentiments exactly, sir. Can you help me with this matter then?"

"I need to think about it. Can we take some tea? Will you join me? I'd like some air. We can talk then. Perhaps we can think of what is possible."

The street was warm and dusty from the morning traffic, but the teahouse he led them to was clean and cool. They settled on cushions out back under a canvas canopy. Tea and cakes were served.

"Even our little village has its comforts," Rajneesh said.

"From your dress and manner, I sense you are from one of the cities."

"From Mumbai. Bombay as you know it. My family has been there many generations. I was schooled though in England, which perhaps explains my 'manner,' as you call it."

"I meant it merely as an observation. A compliment if you will. You do appear noticeably different than the villagers here."

"I am Hindu, they are Sikhs, of course. That is one difference. But I understand what you are saying. My time in England stays with me and it shows. I'm proud of it, actually, and I have no desire to hide it."

"Of course not. A British education is distinguished."

"Yes, very, and I'm fortunate to have it." He was quiet then, ate from the plate of cakes, wiped the crumbs from his lips with a napkin, took several noisy sips from his cup of tea. "One who is so educated, acts and dresses in the manner of an English gentleman must stand out in Pathankot, of course. You must wonder, then, why such as I am stationed in this remote outpost."

Kenu began to protest but the man held up a hand, palm forward, shook his head and smiled gently. "It is nothing and of course you would never be so rude to ask. But I will tell you. My family for many years was in banking. We suffered a reversal of fortune in our largest holdings. They were claimed by our creditors. Now we are rebuilding from what remains of our few banks, those that are too small for our city-based financiers to bother with. This is one of them. And here I am."

They paused the conversation for several minutes then, sipped the tea, ate the very tasty, sweet cakes, each mulled his thoughts

privately. The patio was almost empty, a few men gathered at the far side near the building, smoking from a hookah and talking quietly. The heat outside had yet to take hold beneath the canopy and the space where they sat was pleasantly cool.

"So I have seen \$100 bills before, just not in this place. In Bombay, yes, of course, they frequently came our way. Here it is not only a curiosity but a matter of some difficulty. To exchange it for you requires that I have a cache sent from Delhi on this evening's train to replenish for our banking what I would give to you.

"Then too there is the authorities here who expect to be notified about any such transactions of that size. Smugglers, you know."

Kenu held his gaze, his face expressionless, his composure unshaken, noted the subtle assessment the man made, said nothing, waited.

"That we could ignore in your case, of course. It is not of question. What is an issue is counterfeit bills, which is to make no accusation, my friend. Like us, you may unwittingly be victimized and in turn we would become a victim if we exchanged it for you. These counterfeiters are a plague in our country."

"In fact, Mr. Rajneesh, if it might ease your concern, this bill came with me from my bank in the States. I have several more like it in my money belt."

That declaration served its intended purpose. Although the banker never blinked, Kenu felt the argument disarmed.

"May I look at that bill please?"

He studied it very carefully, tilted it to catch the raised lettering, the matched serial numbers, ran the consistency of the paper back and forth between his thumb and fingers, snapped it once with both hands, and then returned it.

They sat for a long while. Refused more tea when the server offered to replenish the pot, waved away the hookah he indicated nearby, and were finally alone when the other customers departed.

"I have enough rupees on hand to exchange at the official rate one hundred and fifty American dollars," he said finally, looking off in the distance as he spoke. He let that statement float in the air between them before he turned to look Kenu directly in the eye. "If you can match that bill with another just like it we can make that transaction when the bank closes at 4:00 p.m."

Baksheesh for Rajneesh. A rather steep price, too, but he'd learned well in England. Kenu otherwise was stuck and even at these rates he was fortunate to have accomplished the transaction. That was the reality. Fifty dollars was a large hit in India but relative to the investment he transported, it was incidental. Give thanks and pay.

When the crates were loaded, the bearers and their overseer paid, and a porter retained to guard them, Kenu settled into his "private" berth aboard the train, which contained a leather bench the width of the car less the aisle, two bunks on the opposite side, and two Indian army officers who nodded at him in greeting and immediately took possession of the bunks.

Kenu's kit was two nylon cylinders, one a duffle with clothes and toiletries, the other a down sleeping bag. He unrolled the bag on the bench, took the duffle with him to the lavatory at the other end of the car, and washed up as much as the conditions permitted. Lice were combed from his hair, although others evaded the cleansing, his teeth were brushed, face and upper body sponged, shirt and underwear changed. He tossed the dirty clothes from the window.

Back in his bag on the bench, adjusting to the rhythm of the train, the cadence of the wheels on the track, the snoring of his roommates, he finally began to relax. The odor that disturbed his quiet came from himself where the goose down covered his body. It had been a week since he'd bathed. He looked forward to a hotel room in Delhi, where the hot water would kill the lice and cleanse his body if not his soul. Civilization in India as elsewhere had its comforts and he craved them.

Chapter Six

The Allah Akbar felt better than ever. Hot water and soap chased the lice and refreshed his body. His spirits rose. He loved his time in Kashmir, but it was a mode of daily living that yielded much to asceticism at the cost of too many unwelcome creatures which shared the journey with you. Rats, Lice, and History someone once wrote about the factors that shaped our destiny. It was so in Srinagar, he'd found. Lots of each of them.

The hotel presented him with one of those curiosities of fate that caused wonder. A gorgeous young woman flagged him down in the lobby the first full day of his return. She was German he learned from her very broken English and was aggressive when she gained his attention. She gestured at a swarthy, unsavory-looking Indian man who lurked nearby and was the cause of her concern.

She literally wrapped herself around Kenu, physically bound herself to him in a display of attachment that warned off the intruder. After he was gone, then what? The outcome was more than he might have hoped. He would have been content to be the knight who rescued the maiden.

Instead she stuck close to him, joined him for lunch and insisted on paying, then followed him to his room where she produced a small ball of opium and heated it in a fold of tinfoil from which they inhaled the vapors. She gave him an enthusiastic blowjob and, after a pause for more opium and regeneration, they spent the afternoon in bed, naked and rapturous.

She was an official of the German trade delegation to Asia '72, an international fair for purveyors and buyers of major farm equipment. Her responsibility now was to ship a dozen very large tractors, gleaners, and other implements back to Germany. She wanted to smuggle a few dozen tiger skins with them and wondered what he thought.

It crossed his mind how simple it would be to conceal 80 kilos of hashish in the bowels of all that equipment, and how he could make the case it was a more righteous cargo, but he kept his counsel and said nothing.

The next day, Jean-Jacques accompanied him to the customs broker, a man steeped in the nuances of British bureaucracy that permeated the business methods of India. He was a prodigious supplier of paperwork and lots of things that needed stamps and seals of which he was amply supplied and which he wielded with ceremony.

The crates were received, weighed, addressed, and labeled with handling instructions, and finally affixed with assurance of delivery evidenced by the logo of Chubb Inc., the British insurance brokers of whom even Kenu had heard, although not this Indian subsidiary.

He paid the various fees and sent them winging, or rather floating, on their way. They would travel by ship across the Pacific to a customs broker in San Francisco. Delivery expected in four weeks. From there they'd be transferred to an agent for the gallery in Boulder.

He also shipped separately a large bundle of Persian carpets that he bought from a rug merchant in Delhi. Unlike the crates, they were sent under his own name and addressed to himself in Colorado.

Jean-Jacques said nothing about monies due him; apparently he was paid from the broker's fees. In fact, he took Kenu to lunch at a rather lavish place where Lanny, the Canadian woman waited and greeted him with a generous kiss. She looked much revived from the person with whom he shared a chaste night in bed several weeks past. Jean-Jacques appeared to suit her.

After the meal, they said their goodbyes, promised to stay in touch, wished him safe travel, blessings be to one and all. He would never see either one of them again.

Chapter Seven

The time came soon enough when he thought a lot about both of them, him more than her, but both of them remembered, reconsidered, analyzed, examined for any sign of treachery he might have missed at the time. Someone set him up, sold him out, but why? For what?

There were other candidates, of course, that stretched back to Moses, Rajneesh, the Captain in Jammu, who else among the many people he encountered? Someone among them sent the message to those nefarious operatives who seemed to lurk everywhere, the AID folks, Interpol, the prolific and persistent lineup of cops and robbers, that legion of players in the Game. The message: drill the trunks. They did.

He wasn't certain where they effected the discovery. Likely in the States when the cargo arrived, perhaps sooner and then the trunks were sent along with the message. They are hot. Take him down. They did that, too.

The first hint was a call from the customs broker in San Francisco. Kenu had returned to Colorado from Delhi through New York. In a single day he had crossed the Himalayas, the Alps, the Appalachians, and finally the Rockies. The sunrise over the Matterhorn was pure poetry, crossed from East to West in a surge of sunlight. New York to Denver was perfunctory. They looped out over the mountains at sunset, landed from the west, and finally he was home.

Time to gather all those threads into a neat knot. Strands of adventure that stretched West to East and back to be woven together. To complete the deal.

The first order of business was receive the rugs and convert them to cash. He was nearly broke and had plenty of buyers from whom copious amounts of money would flow.

The broker called him and asked any number of odd questions, purported to sort through the various shipping invoices and verify the addressees. "West-East Galleries is the recipient on this end is all I can tell you. It's a collective of art merchants, of which I'm one. My interest is solely in the rugs that are addressed to me."

"Yes, we've received them and a number of other shipments from various places. Most of them we have shipped. A few wait to have the recipients confirmed. There are four large crates containing wooden trunks," the broker told him. "Can you confirm the recipient on your end."

"I can't help you with that," Kenu told him. "My arrangement with you is on behalf of the collective. There are several of us buying and shipping to you from different places. I can't speak for any cargo other than what I myself shipped, which is the Persian carpets. If you will kindly send them to me without delay, I'd be grateful. I have customers waiting for them."

"That I will do. But your help, please. The crates are addressed to Ms. Karis Phelan in Boulder. Do you know how I can reach her?"

"I know who she is, but I don't know where to reach her. Last I heard she was in Israel buying art. If she's not here to receive them when they arrive, no doubt she's arranged for an agent."

He asked about a few other miscellaneous items, things about which Kenu knew nothing, shipments inbound from dealers like himself buying in different parts of the world. The collective had far-reaching tentacles for such a modest enterprise. The thought when it was formed was that disbursed activities are hardest to track. So it was a polymorphous entity called the gallery by many, including Kenu.

The rugs arrived a few days later. No one mentioned to him they were packaged with the trunks. When he signed the receipt for the shipment, he was arrested by federal drug agents and transported to jail in Boulder. A local judge there issued a search warrant for his home, which was raided by a dozen armed agents. He knew nothing about the bag of cocaine they found.

Bail was \$100,000. It was two days before anyone stood it for him and he was released. "WTF?" he asked an associate, who replied, "We all thought you had plenty of money. Don't you?" He didn't. All he had was invested in the art and the product. What he had now were problems.

There was a simple solution. The Feds wanted a guy he knew. Give him up and skate with a couple of months at a country club, just to make it look good. It would have been easy but he couldn't pull the trigger, no matter the asshole the guy might be.

His lawyer shrugged, said, "This hash bust is full of holes. Problem is that ounce of coke. Felony possession. No mercy there. Plead conspiracy to the hash. Maybe I can get the art cut loose."

"That's the best we can do?"

"You can't pay me and you won't make a deal. What am I supposed to do? Not a lot of margin here."

What he did was run the traps pretty skillfully for a counselor who wasn't getting paid, got the felony suppressed and a five year beef scaled down to a year and a day with four years parole.

His knees nearly buckled when Kenu stood before the judge and heard the sentence read. "Five years" almost knocked him down, made the amended sentence of a year seem palatable by comparison. Still it was unfathomable that this was now his pathway.

Chapter Eight

They put him in the circus. It began simply enough.

He turned himself in after the fourteen days he was allowed to get his affairs in order. His affairs! Which of them, he wondered, merited his efforts and which of those would survive this interlude where he was absent. The die was cast, he'd done what he was able to do, and things would be what they would be. There was nothing else to do or say.

So he reported to the Marshall's Office, was relieved of his personal effects, his belt and shoe laces, was handcuffed, shackled, and placed in a holding cell before they transported him a few hours later to Jefferson County Jail and maximum lock up.

They took the rest of his clothes, placed him in an icy shower, stuck a gloved finger up his ass, sprayed him generously with disinfectant, handed him underwear and an orange jump suit, a very thin, frayed towel, a very thin, frayed blanket, and a wafer-thin piece of foam rubber that was his mattress. Then he was led to a cell and the door slid closed behind him.

He wasn't alone. A man of maybe thirty-five, medium height and wiry, a couple of days beard and an implacable expression with dark eyes that seemed to barely take note of his presence. He said, as if speaking to the wall at the back of the cell, "Upper bunk's yours. Do not touch mine getting there," and turned his gaze toward Kenu with a penetrating threat that was meant to register. It did.

The cell was 6 by 9 feet. There were two bunks, a stained porcelain sink, and a steel toilet bowl enclosed by three faded green graffiti-covered cinderblock walls. The fourth was thick steel bars with the doorway and beyond it the catwalk that separated the cells.

"Don't be shitting when I'm in my bunk," his cellmate added quietly, meaning when he's lying down, Kenu thought he meant. "That way we'll get along."

Breakfast at 5:30 a.m. was a bowl of thin gruel and a cup of coffee-colored water passed through the slot in the door on a tray, his cellmate's first and then his. Lunch at 11:00 a.m., a slice of bologna between two slices of stale white bread and a cup of Kool-Aid. Dinner was at 5:00 p.m., some mystery meat and half a cold potato with another cup of Kool-Aid.

In between, there was nothing for Kenu to do except a few sets of push-ups and a lot of time in his bunk, face up, focused on the ceiling a couple of feet above. Swirls in the plaster reminded him of his bedroom as a child. Patterns emerged into amorphous forms he imagined to be one thing or another. The time passed without notice.

There was a lot of noise during the day from the other cells, inmates swore, screamed, others shouted to shut the fuck up. Sleep was not an option. At night, though, it was mostly quiet and he slept.

On the third day, a hack came down the runway between the row of cells pushing a cart of well-worn paperback books, which he offered up for a minute before moving on. His cellmate went first, grabbed a handful and stepped aside. Kenu did the same. It was a mixed bag of westerns, mysteries, and a few romance novels, one among them an Elmore Leonard that was quite good. The rest took up some time.

"It's customary to swap them when you're done, yours for mine," his cellmate said a few days later. "They only come a few times a month." That's what they did. It began a dialogue, very slow at first and guarded, but after a while it persisted.

His name was Adam. He was doing time for murder, two counts, first degree. Soon to be transferred out to the big house, whichever they decided would be his destination. "Not death row, though, even though they got me for premeditated. A life sentence." He shrugged, blew a breath out through his nose, snorted something like a laugh. "It was a crime of passion."

Kenu said next to nothing, made small talk, acknowledged his cellmate's palaver with nods, grunts, modest exclamations. It was the

right response. It kept him talking, a little here, some more there. Eventually he told the story.

"I was doing a nickel. Took the fall for my partner. A stickup went bad. He tripped the alarm but got away. Hauled ass in the car and left me there. The cops caught me down the street, hiding in a dumpster. Five years and he was the one with the gun.

"It was a state beef and the joint was jammed. Had us stacked up like cattle in a pen. So to speak." And he smiled, briefly.

"One of those advocacy groups sued. Inhumane treatment, they said, and a judge agreed. Ordered nearly half of us released immediately. I was barely a year in and out the door before I knew it. Before anybody else knew it either."

He hunched forward on his bunk, very slightly shook his head, rose and walked to the toilet, took a long, noisy leak, and looked at Kenu with something like a smile on his face as he came back to his bunk, but something almost wistful, too.

"When I made it back to my place, slipped in through the back door and was ready to surprise my wife, who do you suppose I found there with her in my bed? I eased my way back to the kitchen, grabbed a paring knife, came back to the bedroom and said, hello.

"Sliced that bastard's dick open like a hot dog, put the blade into his belly a couple of times, too. Dragged her from the bed by her hair, naked as a jaybird and stinking of his spunk, and I only slapped her once, very hard, said, 'You should know better than to ever do me like that.'

"Then I lit out for nowhere and it wasn't long before they picked me up. Assault with a deadly weapon. He survived, but he's humping nothing but scar tissue now. Second beef and they both testified against me. I could hardly believe their nerve. Got me a dime this time and I did more than five of it. Straight up."

He didn't say anything more that night and Kenu knew better than to ask. It happened that the book cart came by again the next

day, they both grabbed a handful, and the paperbacks occupied their time for a while. Several days passed quietly before the conversation resumed.

"Maybe you can imagine how I felt," Adam said to him eventually, and looked at him with something like curiosity, something close to pleading. It was hard to tell but Kenu looked him in the eye and nodded with all the empathy he could muster.

"I had a lot of time to think about it and the more I thought about it, the angrier I was. Some things simply aren't right. You know? Five years considering this thing that's eating away at you, festering there no matter what you do to try putting it aside. It keeps gnawing at you and there's nothing that you can do about it. Not a thing.

"People say: forget it. I don't think so. I wish I could but here I am - here I am again, for that matter. Twice the fool, and there is nothing in a rational thought process that tells me anything except this: these people have treated you like shit. They are free and you are sitting here in prison. There is something fundamentally wrong with this picture and until the time comes, and it will come, sooner or later it will come, all you can do is focus on making it right."

Nothing more was said for several days. The food, such as it was, showed up three times a day at the little slot in the cell wall, the pleas, screams, wails, whatever the population produced as the days passed continued unabated, books were read, and somehow for whatever reason the nights were quiet and sleep was had.

Once a week for 10 minutes or so each of them and all the others one at a time were walked to a shower room at the end of the cell block and they were allowed to wash up, shave, and brush their teeth. Rare as it was made it ethereal.

That particular week, Adam came back to the cell, Kenu was escorted to the shower, and when he returned, refreshed as he was, he found his cellmate pacing, seeming unsettled. Small as the space was, pacing took up most of it. Kenu lodged a freshly washed foot in

the crossbar of the cell door, grabbed the rail of the top bunk, and swung himself into his bed. The energy that unfolded below him was kinetic.

Adam continued to pace back and forth in the circumscribed space, his breathe audible, his rhythm erratic, paused to sit on his bunk for a moment, then sprung up again restless, agitated, spooled out in his mind things that were uncontainable and probably irresolvable.

He stopped pacing and turned suddenly toward where Kenu lay in his bunk, grabbed the frame, and said, "I really loved her. That's what no one understands. That's what made it so terrible."

His face was mere inches away from Kenu, his passion truly frightening.

"People like me, how much love do you get, you know? How often does something like this come your way? It was so terrible to be betrayed. To find her with him. Of all people, with him! And to sit in that courtroom while they testified against me. Him with his bandages and his wounds. Her with her horror she said she suffered. At my hand! Ha! No one asked about what I suffered.

"So, I did my time and the day I got out, I bought a knife with the \$25 dollars they give you when you get released. I went to the Army surplus store and bought a very good knife. I walked all the way to the place they shared, the one that used to be mine, and I cornered them there. I slit his throat ear to ear and laid him in the bed.

"Then I held her by her hair, I looked at her and pleaded with her, just tell me how this could be, how you could do such a thing, tell me something that makes sense. All she did was whimper. 'Please,' she kept saying through the tears, 'please don't do this.'

"She never said why I shouldn't do it, not a word but please don't and so I slit her throat, too. Nearly took her head off when I did. It was horrible. Then I laid her in the bed on top of him and walked away. I couldn't look. I was covered with their blood and I felt dirty. Disgusted. I wanted to vomit but I couldn't. I wanted it to be over,

once and for all. I walked to the police station and turned myself in. One year ago today it was."

Several days passed before another word was said between them. Subtly but distinctly, the mood between them changed. There was now a hostility, an anger and a wariness, each of them gauged the mood and the moves of the other, as though this confession that had emerged over time caused each of them somehow suddenly to be vulnerable, their relationship so immediate because of the space no longer to be viable. Things soon thereafter came to a head. Quick but violent and then they were separated.

Kenu was put in the adjoining cell. Once they had a wall between them, Adam calmed down a little. Began to talk to Kenu, one day called his attention to a chessboard placed in the catwalk between their cells. "You play?" he asked. "Some," Kenu said. They played a few dozen matches over the next week or so, Kenu played left-handed and Adam with his right. Neither of them could see the other, only the chessboard from an odd angle through the bars and the hand of the opponent poised to make a move. Adam's were better. He won or drew every match.

For a few days Kenu had the cell to himself. Being alone made the place seem larger. Bottom bunk definitely was better. Then a new cellmate arrived, one who was notorious and more than willing to tell all about it.

His name was Cyrus. His fame was being the Donut Shop Murderer. He, his son and his daughter-in-law prowled the Dunkin' Donuts, the Donut Hole, Daylight Donuts, all over the southern and western states, looking for the ones late at night where a single young woman was working. They would kidnap her, rape her, each of them, even the daughter-in-law, having a turn, then torture her a while and kill her after they tired of playing, and dump the body in the woods.

"Got me for five of 'em," Cyrus said, almost as soon as he arrived. "At least another dozen they know nothin' about." He smirked and he smiled and slapped his knee. "Don't knock it if you ain't tried it."

The chess matches with Adam ceased when the board disappeared. Hacks probably gave it to someone else or took it home, "a gift for the ol' lady," Cyrus commented with a snort of his wheezy breath.

After dinner, he started mumbling, something Kenu couldn't make out. Finally took a ferociously foul smelling dump in the toilet, came back, said clearly, "That's a little better. This food like to kill ya. Just makes me hungry for a donut or two."

Adam said little to him once Cyrus arrived. One day though he asked, "Got anything worth reading?" "A western I just finished. It wasn't bad." "I got one here you might enjoy," Adam told him. "Wanna swap?"

Kenu reached through the bars and around the wall, passed Adam the book. Adam handed him *The Master Game* by Robert S. de Ropp.

Late at night, the old man started talking very softly, nearly whispering in what passed for conspiratorial tones. "Hard not to think about it this time of night," he said. "It occupies my mind. Be glad to share it with you if you like. So's you can get a sense of why it was so special. Get a taste of it, myself, I found I couldn't quit."

Kenu told him, no, but Cyrus kept talking. It was everything he could do to shut out the man's vivid descriptions. Kenu slept very little for several days until he and the old man had a set-to, slapped the bastard around more vigorously than he intended, and thereafter he was moved to another cell.

This one had an inmate in residence, a rather large, amiable dope dealer from Chicago, whom Kenu barely could keep from hugging, so glad he was to be with one of his own kind. Things for a few days thereafter settled into a reasonably comfortable place.

The two of them got along great, but it wasn't to last long. The circus had run through the first of the loops they had in store for him. Apparently, murderers were in short supply in Jefferson County just then and very soon Kenu was put in motion again.

First, though, there was a visit from an attorney, a prosecutor who asked if Kenu might not like to spare himself all this aggravation, not to mention the danger, and turn state's evidence against a scumbag drug dealer he knew well. Kenu said, no. The attorney said, okay, enjoy the ride.

He was removed from his cell by two very large deputy marshals in the middle of that night and driven to Leavenworth, Kansas, where at dawn he was processed and housed in maximum lockup with some very bad characters. This was the circus big house, but only one of a few he would visit while the federal grand jury back in Colorado was in session and his testimony was said to be pending further incentive.

There wasn't a lot he recalled about Leavenworth other than the fight, one that came at him suddenly and fortunately unarmed, just fists and feet and bloody noses for each of them before the hacks broke it up. The guy was white, not hooked up as far as Kenu could tell. Maybe trying to make his chops, gain a place somewhere, tighten up.

Maybe too, he was sent by someone. Kenu was too new to be targeted by the gangs. And nobody followed up, which had he been a banger would have happened without fail. So maybe somebody above and beyond was sending him a message.

He wasn't there long enough to find out. Within a week, once again in the middle of the night, the cell door opened, two deputies cuffed and shackled him, led him to a car and began a very long drive to where they wouldn't say. "Classified," one of them said and they both guffawed like a couple of hicks. Florence, Arizona, it turned out to be, with a couple of overnights at county jails and another federal joint along the way.

Like Jeffco, it was a cesspool experienced with folks he'd rather not encounter, let alone spend the night with in lockup. It got his attention that some people needed to be incarcerated, removed from the general population and housed under lock and key, and he was placed among them. It also was getting through to him that he was a fool ever to have let that happen. But here he was.

Next was a couple of days at a gladiator camp in El Reno, Oklahoma, one of those Federal joints for the under 27 year-olds, many of whom spent their time trying to prove they were tougher than you were and demanding that you prove them wrong. The one he encountered learned that was true, but Kenu was glad to be moved again that night before the guy had time to lick his wounds and mount a response with his friends.

The zig-zag route to Arizona made no sense if getting there directly was the plan. To bust his balls and sweat him was the objective, though, and it was working well. Kenu was challenged by the disorientation and lack of sleep. The prison population, big house or county joint either, doesn't make comfortable accommodations for the new dog on the block. It takes a while to get settled, squared away, cover your back, choose your mates, if any. They made sure he didn't get it.

By daylight, chained in place in the back seat, the desert sun began to roast the back of his neck, making him feel faint. "Could I have some water?" he asked. The one in the passenger seat turned to look at him, said, "Then you'll be asking to stop and take a leak. Don't think so." Permission denied, it seemed. "It ain't far now," he added.

There were three prisons on a large campus there in the middle of the desert. One was a state joint, one a Federal Prison Camp that once had been an interment center for Japanese Americans during WWII, and one was a large circle of red brick that held 550 prisoners in five large cells of 110 each, nearly all of whom were awaiting trial or sentencing for capital crimes, those that may be punishable by death.

Treason, espionage, murder, large-scale drug trafficking, or attempted murder of a witness, juror, or court officer in certain cases. Those and murder of federal officials, members of Congress, the judiciary, things you might do that can get you the chair.

They were not nice people and Kenu was placed right in the middle of them. Top bunk, of course, in a row near the center of the cell, nearly impossible to get to without violating that space of the guy

in the bottom bunk. He learned from watching others to climb the frame on the end of the structure.

At the back wall was a row of toilets. Along the sides were tall walls of iron bars with catwalks between his cell and the next, all of which radiated like spokes out from the hub in the center. A ring of tables was located there where the inmates were fed, each cell in turn, each meal of the day. The inner-most circle was the guard house.

When you entered the dining quarters you were handed a spoon, which had to be returned after the meal as you filed back out to your cell; otherwise, they put you in the hole. Kenu never learned where that was. He held tight to his spoon, ate with it, and returned it religiously.

He stayed to himself, watched, learned. Who was who, which among them was where in the pecking order, what danger they represented. He did all right at first, kept his distance, his eyes down, alert, ready but in a non-threatening way, eased his way around the impediments, made no waves or noise that could be helped.

Soon enough, though, he was called out to meet with another attorney, a different prosecutor this time, but the same spiel. Thought you might have gotten the message by now, he said. I could say the same to you, Kenu replied. Tough guy, huh, the attorney said. Not at all, Kenu said, and looked him in the eye. But I'm not a cop either. You're going to have to put that guy away on your own.

When he returned to his cell, the vibe changed. He was paid attention and not in a nice way. Suspicion in the joint spread like cancer. Everybody soon enough noted it, factored it into their habits, their system, their method of getting by, and you had to figure out a way to negotiate the barriers they put up. A mistake could be fatal.

Kenu became hyper-alert. First was a fool, one of the guys who drooled on himself and talked incessantly in barely audible volume clear enough only to make obvious he had nothing that mattered to say.

"You and that cop make a deal?" he muttered with a smile, his face close up, his breath rank, "No? Nah, I didn't think so. You don't want to be doing that." He shook his head, laughed a little, and wandered away. Soon enough he was huddled a couple of rows away, talking to two guys who looked Kenu's way.

Another guy passed by as Kenu stood by his bunk, bumped him with his shoulder and said, "Sorry," more like an accusation than an apology. A third guy a little later walked in front of him as he headed to the toilets, stopped and looked at him, expressionless, unmoving, until Kenu stepped aside and let him pass. He took his time about it.

There was a Samoan, a giant everybody gave wide berth. He was said to have detonated a bomb three separate times in short succession within the Honolulu Federal Building. The third one killed a judge and two staffers. He'd been convicted and waited to be sentenced, the death penalty a distinct possibility.

He spent several sessions a day doing katas, the rhythmic dance of Kung Fu. There were more than two dozen separate exercises, of which Kenu recognized several. The Samoan, who was called Pineapple, although not to his face, did them with an obvious mastery and devotion, unfazed by any attention he attracted. Kenu had reached an entry level Black Belt rank, but this was facility of an entirely different level.

He acted out of desperation, saw nowhere else he might find the protection he needed, and sensed at least within Pineapple's orbit that no one else was a threat. He focused on this terrifying person and insulated himself from the other nine dozen personifications of potential harm in this community. He stood by the Samoan and began to replicate the movements of the kata.

They did the long weapon, the short weapon, and the double weapon katas. Pineapple appeared to pay him no notice while they completed the sets. Kenu for a moment felt himself lifted by the beauty of the man's movements, the Ki that flowed from them and through them, and raised him with the master, however briefly.

Pineapple then took three steps forward, pivoted in front of Kenu, bowed ever so slightly with the slightest smile, and assumed a fighting stance. The expression, "a chill ran down his spine," barely indicated the depth of fright that passed through Kenu's body. The curious sensations he felt in the past when he read about the guillotine, or the beheading of an infidel by a Samurai, or the hanging of a cattle thief in the old West, the odd stirring of empathy and fear as he imagined those fates, expanded infinitely in this moment as he faced this terrifying person opposite him, poised in the Mabu Stance and waiting.

Without thinking and only because he had to do something other than stand there frozen with fear, he assumed the Empty Stance and took a breath, maybe his last it occurred to him, just before a blaze of blows and kicks covered every part of his body. They were firm, solid blows. They hurt. There was no defense. He simply absorbed it, suffered it, stood it as he could because there was nothing else he could do.

But soon enough he realized Pineapple merely sparred, pulled punches that otherwise would be lethal. The concluding move was a Tiger Claw that raked across his scrotum from below close enough to make him nauseous. His stomach roiled, bile rose in his throat, and then it was over.

Pineapple nodded briefly, turned and walked away. It took all of his composure to keep Kenu from collapsing where he stood. He was bent over, trying to prepare himself to stand up straight again, and even as he did he realized that not a single person in the entire cell nor even the ones on either side was looking at him. Not one.

Yet every one of them was aware. Something astonishing had just happened and none of them, Kenu perhaps least of all, was certain yet what it was.

Still, when barely a day had passed and two of the meaner and more menacing inmates moved to corner him, Kenu barely begun to assess the situation and address whatever threat was forthcoming

when Pineapple materialized nearby. Not within reach but apparent in his ominous presence and the two guys disappeared.

That event, simple as it seemed and brief as it was, changed the dynamic for Kenu dramatically as if he'd been wrapped in an impenetrable aura. He was protected, it seemed, and everybody knew it.

Even the administration. Within a few days, he was transferred to the nearby Prison Camp, which was something like a country club after where he'd been. The other inmates were actual human beings, the type of folks you might talk to, joke with, share a tale or two late into the evening, and then sleep soundly in a bunk on the ground level rather than up top because that's all there was in this facility and finally there was little enough to fear. It was a tremendous relief.

Chapter Nine

It was a few days after that transfer he finally heard from his attorney. "Yeah, they had you on the circuit. Move you faster than I can find you. By the time the record of your whereabouts is posted, they've moved you somewhere else. Grand jury is about to close up shop. Your good buddy the D.A. is done with you. Did what he did and came up short. Sending you on to Safford. Officially called a Federal Correctional Institution. Just a little south of where you are now. Pretty much a country club, compared to where you've been. With any luck I'll have you out of there in another few months."

"How's my family?" Kenu asked.

"Everything is copacetic," he said. "Far as I know."

"For a guy who isn't getting paid, you seem to be putting in the hours."

"I'm keeping track, you can be sure of it. Expect you'll right the ship before long. I'll have the invoice handy."

Mail arrived a few days later. Letters of all sorts from family and friends, most of them dated back a couple of months and continued up to recent times, none of which he'd answered, obviously, since he'd never received them until now.

Reading them was interesting, being returned to the community from which he'd been forcibly removed, touching bases with those people who'd taken the time to express concern, mere friendship, or simple salutations. He was surprised and moved that so many people reached out to him.

The ones from home, and there were a few of them, were scattered as he read between the lines. Effusive, frenetic, superficially informative, maybe evasive was closer to the truth. An intensity reverberated beneath the surface of what was said that told more of the story than the words.

The first few months would be the toughest or perhaps it would be the other way around. They would tighten up with time or they would unravel. That's how he imagined it when he prepared for this incarceration. Which way it would go was to be determined, but her letters read as though the apex of that arc was near.

Things were stable as he could make them given the circumstances and nobody should be given these circumstances if it could be helped. He made them what they were, though, and that could not be evaded or denied. Too late now for laments, all those thoughts about the way it could have been, what he might have done differently, how she might have been somebody other than who she is. Better to handle the reality of what's what.

That time without contact, he realized now that it was undone, had insulated him from these concerns so successfully that he hadn't considered them until these messages arrived. The keen attention to his own well-being had occupied his thoughts and shuttered the rest of the world from his view.

Self-referential was a soporific indulgence that found him attuned to having but one concern: his own survival. The bigger picture in contrast was more complicated because his focus was prismatic and something clamored for attention in another pixel at the edge of his vision. She was nothing if not an attention-getter.

No sooner had he settled, fattened up a little on food that actually was edible, even marginally tasty, got to know a few inmates, marijuana dealers mostly and so essentially soulmates, felt a little more comfortable and relaxed, when two deputies came to get him once again, although this time not until mid-morning and with an hour's notice to gather himself and his stuff such as it was, and prepare for the two hour jaunt to Safford, cuffed this time to a chain around his waist but not shackled. Apparently he was moving up in the world.

"How did our people treat you?" one of the Marshals asked. They rode through a deep stretch of the Valley of the Sun, nothing but sand and cactus as far as he could see. The heat outside was cooled by the

ferocious whirl of the car's air conditioner and because the sun was overhead, blocked by the roof and he in its shadow, Kenu actually felt a little chilled.

"Okay, I guess. It was usually the middle of the night. They didn't have much to say. The one trip by daylight was like being a steak on a grille. When you haven't seen the sun in weeks, it heats you up pretty quickly beating through the rear window."

"They give you something to drink at least?"

"After a few hours, I asked. They said, no."

The cop just shook his head. After a few miles, he said, "The thing about the circuit is: they want to keep the pressure on, ratchet it up, you know? Get your attention any way they can. Everybody wants to be the one to break you. All of them humping for a promotion. They have their own ideas about how to make that happen."

"Never was of interest to me personally. These prosecutors never want to go to trial without a snitch. Afraid to lose a case if they rely on just the evidence they gather. Need that guy up there on the stand, saying, 'Yeah that's the way it was. He did the deed. Saw it with my very own beady little eyes.' Jury eats it up and the D.A. keeps his conviction rate at 100%. Everybody's happy. Me, I always wondered why I should do their job for them. Not my thing."

"Barry might disagree with me," and at that the driver snorted, "but I've been doing this for a while. Find that a lot of the people we're hauling around are pretty decent folks. Not all of 'em, for certain," and the driver chuckled aloud, "but when you get right down to it, we're all in the same business. Crime and punishment, right?"

"There's a lot of punishment they can lay on you to get you to turn, and the more you resist it, the more they turn up the heat. Put you on the merry-go-round, no contact with the outside world, even your attorney can't catch up with you, have us haul you from one place to another, grab you in the middle of the night, keep you disoriented, dump you in another cell with the creepiest bastards they can find, but you don't fold."

"Then you get to this point. The grand jury closes up shop, D.A. craps out, they're done with you. He can't bring charges and there's no point in fucking with you any longer. All is forgiven - well, forgotten anyhow. Until then, you and I are two sides of the same coin. You get hauled and I do the hauling. You pay my mortgage, so as long as you don't fuck with me, I'm going to treat you decently.

"We can be civil, give you a ride, drop you off and go our own way. Before long nobody will even remember your name. Do your time and be done with it. Until next time. That's the way it works."

Kenu said nothing. Kept his thoughts to himself. He will do his time and be done with it. What else could he do? There will *not* be a next time, though. That much was for certain. Once a mistake, twice a fool.

"You decide you need a drink, just say so. We can tighten you up. No attitude whatsoever on my part. You seem to keep your own counsel and do your own time. That's the way it ought to be, y'ask me."

Chapter Ten

What had been in prison parlance cruise control at a country club for his first several weeks at Safford suddenly was dangerous ground. The vibe changed in a very distinct way.

Menace was directed at him wherever he went in the compound. It was noticeable enough that other inmates kept their distance and even Phil one morning eased up to him in the food line, whispered, "Word is they're gonna cut you," and moved on. A warning in case he hadn't grasped the seriousness of what was developing, intended as his or perhaps Raymond's gesture of respect but also notice to defend himself, that no other help would be forthcoming.

Cut. Shank. There was a difference in those terms. This wasn't the big house sort of violence, he hoped, the kind where vicious gangs send people to kill you without a second thought. The population here, at least most of it and especially the Mexicans, wasn't hardened killers. Most of them were doing a year or two for minor crimes. Why would they add a murder rap to their sentence a few months removed from heading home?

Shank means stick a knife in your ribs. Probably kill you. Attempted murder either way. Premeditated at that. Take on that beef and it'll be a long time before you're back at your pad banging the old lady.

"Cut you." He wasn't sure what that meant but even at best it didn't sound good. Maybe it was a warning. Shot across the bow. Just deep enough to redeem that macho manhood in the eyes of your peers. A step up from a fistfight but just enough to let it go unreported. Hurt but not fatal. A wound. Or a handicap. Something permanent. What? He knew it was coming but he didn't know what.

He did know he would fight it. He wasn't sure how.

It came soon enough. One morning he noticed there was no one around. The entire dorm was empty except for him. The cleaning crew

was nowhere to be found. Other than the whir of the swamp cooler, there wasn't a sound. Waves of heat rippled across the line of sight in the emptiness beyond the windows where nothing else was moving. Kenu was completely alone.

Absurdly, his first thought was for the snake. Its safety, to make sure it wasn't hurt. He envisioned it being cut in half. He stripped off his pants, unbuttoned the back pocket flap, shook the snake onto his bunk and took it in his hand.

He was going to put it in the jar, but the men appeared at the head of the aisle before he opened his locker. Two of them held fast by the door, three more moved toward him. The one in front took a knife from his pocket and held Kenu's gaze with bright eyes and a malicious smile of blinding white teeth as he unfolded the blade.

Close behind him to his right was the kid with a black eye ageing to purple and yellow. He looked like he was struggling to project redemption but he couldn't hide his nerves. All this was on him, the entire narrative arc of this episode of vengeance about to be enacted, and he was afraid.

The guy with the knife and the guy to his left, who carried a short piece of pipe, moved slowly and with confidence like they'd been in this movie before or at least imagined it clearly enough to know how to act. The malevolence they radiated seemed to be studied, the frayed edges of their practicum revealed itself in mannered strides as the proximity between them and Kenu narrowed.

He felt in that moment spellbound, not by fear nor confidence, not even by the sheer curiosity of experiencing something altogether new that entranced him as it reeled out a frame at a time in slow motion. Rather, it was an odd elation of being without thought or impulse, idea or inclination, without the slightest imagination of what he should do.

They were very close now. He held an arm out toward them, the snake held fast, his eyes locked on the gaze of the man with the knife. With a slight smile, he opened his fist, his hand flat and the snake

nestled there. It moved its head slightly from side to side, flickered its forked tongue, felt its way.

The men stopped in their tracks, their eyes now on what took place in his hand even as he himself watched it and wondered if this was a fatal mistake he'd made or accidental brilliance born of this moment of no expectations in which he, Kenu, the snake, and the men there to assault him were mere players in a drama written on a tableau by an unknowable hand.

The snake moved very slowly, slid between Kenu's fingers and wrapped itself around one, then another, then slipped back into the center of his palm where it coiled around itself and lifted the upper half of its body into a pose that was ready to pounce. Its head waved slightly, its mouth open, it looked exactly like it threatened to strike the man with the knife in his hand.

Nothing except the snake moved and it moved only slightly, hypnotically, its tongue flickered toward the assailants, its tiny teeth bared. Was it illusion that a hiss accompanied its posture? Did its eyes truly focus on the man with the knife? Each of them in the room, the three men there to harm him, Kenu himself, and the men distant at the doorway shared the distinct sense of being suspended in a mesmerized moment of time where anything might be possible and none of them knew what to do.

In layers the three men began to peel away, the guy with the swollen face first and the henchman second, each of them backed away wide-eyed and mouth agape. The guy with the knife seemed frozen in place and afraid to move, as though the slightest shift in his posture might provoke the snake to strike, distant as it was and no more able to bite into his flesh from there than he was to cut Kenu with his chosen weapon, one that now seemed inferior to the task at hand and inconsequential in the face of this tiny, terrible serpent.

Finally, he backed away, gained enough distance to turn and not quite run but stumbled away and dropped the knife as he fled. He looked back from the doorway defeated and disbelieving at what had

laid him low. Then he was gone with the rest of them, and with them the danger, too.

Kenu turned slowly, arm outstretched and hand held steady, dropped the snake to his bunk, and breathed deeply into the moment, shaken and stunned by what had just occurred, how it was resolved, and what power it conferred.

Very carefully he picked up the snake and stroked its head. For the first time in his experience with it, the snake was agitated. It writhed in his hand, not violently but persistently enough that his breath and its gyrations took several minutes until each of them calmed down.

Chapter Eleven

Word got around. His place in the prison camp community thereafter was bizarre. When he approached a crowd of the Mexican inmates, the seas parted and like Moses he passed by unobstructed. None of them wanted to be anywhere near him.

The other inmates were friendlier but gave him a wide berth. He was distanced from them, not because of the snake but the experience itself, the other-directed state of being in which it took place. Detachment was a continuation of the hyper-awareness that possessed him when the men came for him, the snake coiled, and everything in the moment unspooled frame by frame exquisitely detailed.

It was that way for Kenu now as each day came and went. He was awed by the experience he had, an aura of clarity and even profundity that had settled around the sentence he served and the very people among whom he lived and breathed, as though he had come this far and done all the things he'd done before he grasped the full arc of this story that unfolded and his place in it.

He witnessed the steady deterioration of Phil's composure as his release date drew near and the realization of what awaited him on the other side of the gate gripped him with its uncertainty. He saw that imposing physical being, one who had made his way with his fists and weapons, his disciplined submission to the chain of command, become untethered at the prospect of freedom, cowed by not knowing what he'd find there but also by how thoroughly institutionalized he was and the fear it inspired in him to lose his familiar place there.

He saw as well in contrast the calm demeanor and precise approach to his release that Raymond manifested as the date drew near. Unlike Phil, unlike so many of the other henchmen here, he had a place waiting for him, one that dealt the cards, spun the wheels, cranked the slots, raked in the money as it always had before he fell and always would long after he returned.

"Keep writing, kid," he said to Kenu, and shook his hand the morning he departed, "and you can be sure there's a suite waiting for you with my compliments anytime you're in town." It didn't rhyme but it reeked of sincerity.

He heard repeatedly the hackneyed refrain the inmates used to taunt the guards, "I'll be getting out one day but you're a lifer, man!" and watched it roll off their backs as one of the few bits of backtalk that was permitted by prison staff.

However it was received by different ones among them, the sadists, the placid, the ones for whom it was just a dreary job, those who got some satisfaction by having power over these lowest of society's lowlifes where elsewhere they themselves were mostly powerless, he recognized as they all did that it was true. Partners in crime and punishment they inarguably were, evidenced again by the wistfulness expressed in their individual ways when inmates were released and they remained.

What he saw and felt and thought about most persistently were the visions and moods and deliberations that came to him when he learned his home was gone, his family scattered, his partner defeated and decamped after she dumped his two older children with his mother and she with their daughter fled to her mother in another state.

The deterioration of that marriage could be sourced to pressures of many sorts that flooded into the place where the hopeful enterprise was housed. Because he blundered in a naive adventure, failed to appreciate the dire consequence of his miscalculated odyssey and trifling with deities, she was asked to bear an extraordinary burden and he needed more from her than she could give.

There was nothing malicious about her decision. She did what she could for as long as she could and then she walked away from it all. Ran, rather. Placed the children, packed her bags, didn't even lock the door, left the house and their belongings to be ransacked by scavengers.

Owning those outcomes can crush you but there is simply no way to rationalize them. He didn't try. They were his, in his face as any experience that ever had come his way. No amount of contemplation, no reassessment or redirection lessened the pain nor obscured the truth of what happened and the finality with which it settled in his considerations.

There was one healthy response he mustered after all the assembly of guilt, shame, hurt, anger, disappointment, recrimination, after that legion of emotions pulsed through his nervous system and gathered in his mind, was sorted through, acknowledged, and finally surrendered to because there was nothing he could do to change it, to make it different than the harsh reality of what it was, and that was to accept it and let it be.

The coral of the necklace he once imagined at her throat and the bands of the coral snake came to his mind simultaneously and coalesced as things he didn't understand and couldn't change, creatures of sere beauty and lethal attraction, held safely for a time and freed in a moment of danger to do what they will, without knowing which way they might strike.

As his own release date approached, Kenu's transcendent mood wavered a bit, challenged by that overwhelming urge to count off the days and hours and minutes as a bespoke torture crafted just for him. He longed to resolve this untoward adventure.

Lieutenant Bond came to him one afternoon, said, "If you're not gonna keel it, I sure don't think you oughta be taking it with you. Isn't exactly government property, I guess, but still." Kenu returned to his bunk, took off his pants, unfastened the pocket flap, and dropped the snake onto the bunk. By now the creature actually leaned into his grasp as he picked it up. He stroked its head gently, rhythmically. "You're a crazy one," Bond said.

They walked across the basketball court, Bond in his uniform, Kenu in his shorts, and through the weeds to where the oval track was worn away to bare sand, climbed over that first low wall and into no man's land the width of three strides to the outer wall. Bond kept

arm's length and then some the entire walk and now they stood a good six feet apart. "Well?" he said and looked at Kenu. "Let's get it done."

Kenu never thought about this moment until it arrived. It was a long time ago he had asked permission to take the snake to the wall and release it. Man and beast encountered each other in many ways since then, once on another plane of existence altogether. To say the snake saved his life might be hyperbole or maybe not. For certain it saved him some serious pain.

It's likely, too, that he saved the snake's life or at least spared it pain, so we might say fair is fair. Whatever the case, and as distant as they were from each other on the evolutionary scale, they shared a bond. Between them something so extraordinary occurred that Kenu was a changed man. Whatever the snake may have made of the experience, it without doubt had been unique for it, too.

A man and his snake. It doesn't have a ring to it. But this beautifully banded creature was difficult to let go. Kenu stroked its head again, as he had so many times these past few months, then he leaned over the wall and placed it in the sand so gently that the creature paused to sense where it was.

It wiggled away from the wall a short way, then turned and came back, flicked its tongue rapidly as it assessed its whereabouts and a new order of familiarity. Kenu and Bond watched it with different degrees of curiosity and interest, but both of them were stunned when the snake rose into the striking pose and looked right at Kenu, its eyes dark coals, weaved its head back and forth very slightly, tested the air between them with its quick red tongue. Then it settled to the ground and slithered away.

"I am not believing what I just saw. Like that damn snake was saying goodbye to you. That can't be real."

Kenu didn't say anything. In fact, he had a lump in his throat and the same sense that it can't be real, what just happened. But he knew it was.

"You are something else, Mr. Kenu." Bond said as they walked back to the compound. "I always tell my inmates when they get released that I expect to see them again real soon. And I usually do. In your case, I suspect I won't and I have to tell you that would be my preference. No offense, but it's so."

Chapter Twelve

Kenu was surprised to learn upon release the warden himself shook his hand, wished him good luck, and confirmed that his belongings were properly returned. They were. For the first time in nine months he wore his own clothes, his watch, and had in his left rear pocket his wallet with \$225, the \$25 a gift from the federal government to get him started on the road to reform. In his right rear pocket was a bus ticket to Boulder, Colorado.

He refused the option to be driven to the bus station a couple of miles distant in the center of what passed for a town. Instead he walked. If he had his druthers, he'd never sit in a government vehicle again. Even in January by 10 a.m. when he strolled out the gate it was getting warm. He was used to it though and fairly floated that hike to the bus.

He was on the pay phone collect to his business partner at the gallery in Boulder when the bus pulled in to the lot at 2 p.m. Pulled in and departed so fast he grabbed his bag and headed out the door when the bus left the station. He chased it down the block before it stopped and he boarded.

"Don't think you're a free man," he was told in the recitation of instructions he received before they released him that morning. "Four years of federal parole begins today. Get on that bus and don't get off until you get to Boulder. When you do, you will immediately call this gentleman." They handed him the card of an officer of the United States Department of Justice. "Your parole officer. You'll get to know him well before all this is over. Do what you're told and you'll get along fine."

Boulder was a small town. Kenu knew the guy whose name was on the card. Knew him to be an asshole, a pompous little man who enjoyed exercising his authority over the misbegotten. They would have to find a way to come to terms.

The bus went east toward I-10 to Deming and La Cruces then north to I-25. There were a dozen or so passengers, some left and others boarded at each stop, mostly older, beat-up looking folks down on their luck, or a few on some sort of family trip, maybe off to see relatives, about half Mexicans, a few Indians, a few whites, and Kenu.

It was slow going. This bus seemed to be the local. It stopped at every little town along a circuitous path vaguely headed north along the highway with odd detours.

At Truth or Consequences, they stopped for an early supper at a combination bus stop and cafe. The food wasn't much but far better than what he'd eaten for many months now. Pozole was pretty good, he thought, once he'd finished it and topped it off with a Hershey bar and coffee.

He noticed an old couple who boarded there because of a very large doll the woman carried, child-sized with striking eyes of what looked like lacquered metal, a big round face with rouged cheeks, a mouth with bright red lips shaped somewhere between surprised and satisfied, and a colorful gingham dress with shiny black shoes.

The man took the window seat near the front, the woman the aisle with the doll in her lap, its face above her shoulder, looking Kenu's direction. For an inanimate object it surprisingly captivated he thought to himself as the bus pulled away into the twilight and soon he paid it no more attention because he was fast asleep.

He dreamt of a jumble of things, those poignant if nonsensical images that rolled through the unconscious mind before he drifted into another place. There the thoughts attached to the pictures in a sequence he realized even as he slept he would remember when he awakened.

He was a child in a room, his bedroom it was, that little rectangular place in the basement of a small brick home where he was raised. There was one small window at the top of the wall, barely large enough to squeeze through when he cranked the glass up to join the swirls in the plaster of the ceiling, removed the screen and, fearful

of the black widow spiders that lived in the junipers at the base of the wall, slipped through the frame and snuck away into the night.

There was his father, too, who loomed larger than the spider and was far more likely to strike. Punishment and that room were synonymous. Something always was wrong, a mistake made, lack of respect shown, behavior that was unacceptable and a price to be paid. What could a kid pay with but his freedom? His dignity? That little piece of life that was himself?

Forty days and nights in that room at one stretch one summer. He took his meals on a tray, left only to use the toilet as needed and the shower once a day, penance for some transgression no longer remembered and soon enough replaced by another.

Running away got him nowhere but nights down a coal chute into the basement of friends who thought it exciting to sneak him leftovers from the family meals in support of the strange person hidden there. Marguerite's mother talked him into going home when she discovered him. Think of the pain it's causing your mother, she said. The pain it brought him when he did was another matter altogether.

His great aunt and uncle came to take him away. His father arrived just as they were ready to depart and Frank told him it's for the best as they put the boy in the back seat of their car and his mother in the doorway twisted her hands in her apron. She knew there would be hell to pay.

Raton was the best time of his life, a year of normalcy, being himself and never beaten or restricted. When it was time to go back to Denver, he was sorry. But he was older and bigger, too. His father noticed.

He had a girlfriend now. She lived in a big house on a parkway and when she asked him where he lived, he was embarrassed but he told her. She said, "That's a scary part of town. Aren't you afraid to go there?" Not for the reasons she imagined.

Before long he left for good. Just being on his own was a thrill. Sleep in the cemetery, live on yesterday's donuts from the bakery and pizza where he worked, it all felt good. People took him for who he was. No one made him do anything.

There was a child, then another. He didn't know any better. But he wanted to do it right. Be there for them but for himself, too. Do it the way it should be done. Not a lot more than he was raised with, yes, but more. Not another stretch in the basement. Not screws put in a plate in a factory or sheet rock and cement unloaded from boxcars for minimum wage. All he wanted was to do it in a way that worked for him so he could work for them. Room enough to make a life for a family. It didn't satisfy their dreams.

He awoke with a start in the middle of the night in a bus that was parked by the side of the road he knew not where. A little girl pulled on his arm. "Come on, you have to see," she said. Her eyes were bright, her face lit with excitement.

The bus was empty except for them, the dim light of a cafe out the window to his right competed with the gleam of a full moon. Cafe Angel Fire the sign said. There was that moment he came awake, the aftertaste of the dream he'd had, this curious little girl in her gingham dress who insisted he follow her. So he did.

She held his hand, led him up the aisle, he twice or more her size and yet fully in her sway. At the front of the bus, in the platform next to the driver's seat that was the landing, before that huge, bifurcated window spotted with the splatter of bugs, the child turned to him with bright eyes and something like amazement on her face that demanded his attention, gestured with her arm and said, "Look!"

He saw through the window in front of the bus stood a huge snowy owl of brilliant white feathers and large, dark eyes. It turned its head slowly left, then right, then looked at Kenu as though it just noticed him and considered how to respond to his presence. It seemed to be in no hurry.

The bird nodded once, dipped slightly on its thin, dark legs, and lifted itself into the air with wings that covered the entire window. Then it was gone.

Breathtaking as it had been, sudden and stunning, only a moment or two passed, so he thought. He didn't notice the girl depart, and when he looked for her in the cafe, she was nowhere to be found.

In fact, here in the middle of nowhere in the middle of the night, at this humble little cafe that was open only to service the bus and its passengers headed north, there was no one he recognized but the driver, and even he appeared to be huddled with his replacement, another guy in a grey uniform but his newly pressed, unwrinkled, and like his face fresh and ready for the next leg of the journey. All of the passengers Kenu embarked with and those picked up along the way seemed to have departed while he was asleep.

Back on the bus, as he and the others left the land of enchantment and headed for Alamosa, Kenu felt that newly familiar stillness take hold. He was on the way to his next destination, a community that had been his and perhaps would be again, where he had a fledgling business but no longer a home or a family there, where he was to spend the next three months living at a halfway house among strangers to prepare for his reentry into society. That's how it was.

He had no possessions whatsoever except the clothes on his back and the toiletries in his Dobb kit. He had no address, phone number, no one to put his arms around when he reached Boulder and the end of this episode in his life.

Like the coral snake, he had settled in someone's pocket for a while, rested in a container with holes in the roof to let in the air. He had kept a calm demeanor, alert and ready to strike, but mostly unnoticed except when disturbed. He passed over the wall and moved through the sand and cactus, caught the bus, wended his way with strangers who came and went as they rode one to the next through a necklace of towns like coral beads and nuggets that were found where the waters receded and dry land remained.

A doll child woke him, showed him the owl, which eyed him once and flew away, and all that time before and the passengers he rode with and the little girl too took flight with it.

Far to the east across the sere plains, the sun lifted above the horizon, and while the earth still was deeply shadowed, it lit the banks of clouds deep grey where they were thickest rimmed with salmon at the edges and hints of coral there, too.

In that dark land below were the killers, the psychotics, the demented, and the Mexicans with knives, the hacks and the prosecutors and all the other terrors of the night, and above them in the sky were the colors of light as it advanced. Home was to be made somewhere between them.

...END...