

Silent Source

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CHAPTER 1

Like fashion, torture comes in a variety of styles. The paramedic shoved the gurney into the ambulance. Why would anyone, he thought, force Father Michael O’Shannon to trample through a bed of burning coals? *And in the name of Jesus?* He’d never heard anything like the babbling of the old priest. There were plenty of outlandish stories about the church and Catholics, but he assumed tales from his drinking buddies were all bullshit.

He tucked the blanket around the priest’s vomit-stained collar. His partner with less than two months on the job collected the BP cuff and IV tube.

Father O’Shannon struggled to breathe. He curled his knees into his chest in agony and then muttered as he reached toward his red swollen feet: “They keep shoving me.”

The paramedic wiped foam away from the mouth of the priest with a tissue and leaned toward his ashen face.

Words trickled from the old man’s lips with his drool. “They hold me back, then push at me again. I . . . I can’t take it anymore.” He uttered each word as if it were his last.

When the ambulance rolled away with its siren blaring, the paramedic adjusted the IV saline dripping into the frail vein. All would be reported to the cop stationed at Grady’s ER after the paperwork was filled out. He leaned back and stared across at his partner. “What the hell’s going on around here?”

The rookie shrugged and shook his head.

By the time they arrived at the emergency entrance to Atlanta’s Grady Memorial, the Father had erupted into violent convulsions. Yellow foam gushed from his mouth and showered the blanket.

Just like with the others.

* * *

Damon Keane crept across the gorge on some hikers’ jerry-rigged bridge of tattered rope and rotting timber. It looked like a fifty-foot drop. He gingerly steered his right foot forward as he hugged ropes on either side.

“Careful, Alonzo!” he shouted. Keane was in his third year of volunteering as a chaperone for a week each summer at Dream Valley Ranch for wayward teenagers.

The Pérez boy stumbled ahead over the makeshift span that swayed like a dinghy in a gale. An older teenager in the group behind yelled that Keane wasn’t moving fast enough—the same teen who’d tripped him “accidentally” on the hiking path ten minutes before. Keane’s first mistake was agreeing with Alonzo that the troop should take the swinging bridge to get back to the campsite. They could’ve finished the hike on the sidewalk along the highway bridge, the way normal people crossed the ravine.

The contraption spanning the gorge reeled from side to side again. Keane felt like a cat on a chandelier. “Hold tight, Alonzo.” At thirteen, the terrified boy was the youngest of the group.

The older kid yelled from behind, “Whatsamatta, Dr. Keane?” Apparently fifteen-year-old Tucker Carlton needed for the others to hear him and have something to chortle about at dinner.

Keane turned to face Tucker, a boy who approached his own six-foot-two-inch height but was too scrawny to match Keane’s well-toned frame. At that moment Keane realized the swaying wasn’t coming from the wind but from Tucker yanking on the ropes and rocking the frigging bridge. Deep within the darkest cavern of his mind, Keane thought he’d wait for Tucker to catch up and then give him an ever-so-gentle nudge over the side. It likely wouldn’t be received well by the Dream Valley Ranch Board of Directors. “Stop it, Tucker! Stop it now—or else. You’re scaring the daylights out of Alonzo.”

“Help!” Alonzo yelled. He’d slipped and one bony leg had jammed between the wooden slats. From the expression on his face, he was about to puke over the side.

Keane hustled for him as the bridge galloped under his feet. Tucker followed, giggling.

Keane’s imagination took over. *I’ve come before the board this morning to give you a detailed account of the tragic accident last week. What I tell you may differ a good bit from what the young eyewitnesses shared with the news media. But as you might understand, all of the boys were terribly traumatized by the sight of one of their own, flailing through the air, screaming*

When he got to Alonzo he grabbed him with one arm and jerked on his skinny ribcage to release the trapped leg. With his free hand clamped tightly to one side-rope, he staggered across the fluttering bridge as he timed each step to the bobbing of the slat ahead. They had almost made it to the end when a gust of wind blew the boy’s Braves cap away, and he cried out. Three more long strides and both reached solid earth.

Alonzo slid from Keane’s grasp and cheered as if he’d won a race. Keane

stooped and gripped his knees as he tried to regain normal breathing. Tucker Carlton slapped him on the shoulder as he jogged past and yelled, “It’s my turn for the white pieces after supper!”

“No chess for you until you shape up,” Keane growled back.

Alonzo ran after Tucker, who was laughing, and both boys disappeared over the hill. Keane then spotted a familiar face.

Jessie Wiley, dressed in a dark-green jumpsuit that contrasted with her delicate features, marched toward him as if on parade. Her carriage and trim outfit covering long, slender legs revealed a take-charge attitude. He was startled to see the elite group following her.

The celebrity among them spoke first. “Enjoying yourself, Dr. Keane?” Sandwiched between two Georgia state troopers, Carl Stillwell moved with the grace of a mature lion. A handsome African American, the mayor of Atlanta grabbed Keane by the shoulder and vigorously pumped his hand like he was greeting a campaign contributor. The mayor’s khaki pants and Carolina-blue knit shirt gave him the air of a professional golfer on tour. “My people had trouble locating you,” he said. “Thankfully they were put on to Miss Wiley here. She promised to deliver me directly to you.”

Jessie shot Keane a wink. She was a freelancer like himself, but a whopping difference set them as far apart as the ravine he’d just crossed: she took to the outdoors as if brought up by a family of Grizzlies on the banks of a wilderness river.

“I wasn’t surprised a bit,” the mayor said, “to learn you were spendin’ some time here at the ranch. Doggone beautiful place, isn’t it now? Doggone beautiful.”

Keane had found that working with boys in need of a father figure was therapy—another chance at what he’d missed in raising his own two kids, now at the tail end of their teens. His sister had talked him into getting involved at Dream Valley when he was going through his divorce.

Jessie led a group of curious boys away as the mayor’s expression turned somber. “You just might be able to guess why I wanted to have a face-to-face with you, Damon. Now am I right about that?”

“I suppose there’s a problem?”

The mayor moved closer and lowered his voice. “You’re damned right we have a problem.” He twisted his head both ways and hitched his trousers. All Keane could think about at the moment was what had happened two years before. Keane had found that working with APD’s detectives on the Reinauer case was nothing but miserable from the get-go.

Assignments for small-time operations like APD’s Strategy and Special Projects Division were only a public service. He’d been a consulting scientist for the last fourteen years on missions around the country. Unique in his business,

he carried degrees in both medicine and physics. But he was best known for his forensic smarts. He could quickly look over the data and evidence; show where the logic was inconsistent or crucial clues missed. Then he'd recommend the best course of action and step out of the way. Let others take action and get the credit. People who mattered knew his capabilities.

It was tough to look Stillwell in the eye and say no, but fortunately this time would be easy. Everyone retires at some point and everybody understands that. "I have to apologize, Mayor, but—"

"Let me get to the point, Damon."

"But, sir—"

"Grady Memorial has had two unexplained deaths on their hands. They tell me both died with the same symptoms but with no obvious cause. Then to beat all, yesterday a priest was brought into their ER with symptoms exactly like theirs. He's not expected to make it. All three came from the Piedmont Park area. No gunshot or stab wounds. Infectious disease docs have found absolutely nothing. People are dropping but no one has any idea what's going on—not a clue. I decided it was a good time to call on you again. I'd like you to work with Chief Walters or whoever he partners you with. Not a lot for you to do here, Damon. Just give us your advice on what needs to be done. I place a lot of faith in your judgment. You know that."

Keane had never met Dallas Walters. The mayor had recruited the new chief of police from Nashville the year before during a political storm over the city's deepest budget cuts in its history.

"To be totally honest," Keane said, "I'm in the midst of moving on. I really can't take on any new work."

The mayor paused as if taken aback by sudden news he damn well should've been forewarned about by his people. That's why you have people. "I'm . . . sorry to hear that. Not leaving Georgia now, are you? There's no reason to leave this beautiful state. Right?"

"I'm planning on it but haven't told anyone yet. I'd like to keep it confidential." He glanced over at Jessie Wiley, who was out of earshot.

The mayor lifted his shoulders and shoved them back as he glanced at the sky. Then he looked down and twisted the toe of one shoe in the grass as if squashing a fire ant. "That will be Georgia's loss. Where you headed?"

"One of the islands around Tahiti. I'd keep the place I have here, but spend most of the year there."

"You're a young man, Damon. Retirement isn't good for young men. Specially those with your kinda talent."

"I'm actually looking forward to finally having some free time," Keane said.

The mayor placed a firm hand on Keane's shoulder. "That's what graves are for, aren't they? Why they dig 'em deep. Quieter down there."

Two weeks before, Keane had been combing the warm white sands of Bora Bora with his toes while staring out over towering banyan trees and turquoise water toward Mount Otemanu. The more he thought about it, the more he needed to put Atlanta and the States behind. Family matters out West had complicated his life again. The never-ending demand for his services in the East gnawed at his gut more and more—especially after passing the big Four-O.

But what got him thinking hard and long about his future was his annual physical the month before. Chest x-rays picked up a spot on his lung that was confirmed by a CT scan. Although he'd never smoked, the spot had the appearance of an oat cell tumor, and he knew the stats on that one. Scared hell and perspiration out of him. He hardly slept for three days until they got back the needle biopsy: scar tissue, for no reason the docs could explain. He escaped that one but it was too damned close and got him thinking about life's Second Half while walking out onto a foggy playing field.

"I don't want to sound heartless," the mayor said, "but you know what would happen if CNN began snoopin' around. And you know how they *love* doing that. It's gonna be a real challenge—much bigger than the Reinauer case, Damon. By the way, I'm told instructors over at the academy often refer to that one. Now that's a fact."

"I didn't know that, Mayor, but you see—"

Stillwell motioned for Keane to move closer, and then he leaned over to whisper in his left ear. "My wife and I are members of that parish, Damon. Father O'Shannon—the priest dying down at Grady Memorial right now as we stand here—was the very same man who married Genevieve and me. We were the first black couple to have a wedding in that church. I hope to God Almighty there's no connection. I'd never forgive myself. I owe Father O'Shannon for the courage he showed me. For what he did for the entire African American community in Atlanta."

Keane glanced away to watch the boys running about and then turned back and committed the innocent blunder the mayor was waiting for. "Would the hospital and APD know I'd be checking on them?"

The mayor instantly flung an arm around Keane's shoulder and grabbed his hand to pump again. "I've already put the word out, including to Shropshire at Grady. You'll have full support from everybody, Damon. I *knew* I could count on you."

I haven't said yes. "But—"

"I really owe you one for this one."

That's what you said last time!

"Remember to keep me informed," the mayor said as he squeezed Keane's shoulder. "I need someone like you to give me the straight scoop. Not just what I want to hear."

Typical Southern charm paled in the charismatic glow of Carl Stillwell. “I really can’t promise much,” Keane said under his breath.

“If you need me to run interference for you,” the mayor said, “leave me a message. That’s all you gotta do.” He handed him his card with his private number scribbled on the back then spun on his heels and took off.

Jessie Wiley and the state patrolmen rushed to keep up. She glanced back with a coy smile and gave Keane a thumbs-up. Keane grinned and shook his head as if to say *I can’t believe your chutzpah*. He’d look into the mayor’s request. It was certain to be a job out of his arena—one that was more likely for infectious disease specialists at the CDC. He quickly recognized that. The sooner he did his homework and got back to the mayor, the better.

The South Pacific awaited.