

Cigar City Crimes
Triple
Jeopardy

BOOK TWO IN THE

KYLE McNALLY DETECTIVE SERIES

J. E. BOYDSTON

and M. BROOKE McCULLOUGH

Cigar City Crimes, Triple Jeopardy
Book Two in the Kyle McNally Detective Series

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J. E. Boydston

In memory of my friend, Ronaldus Maximus.

“I know that pain is the most important thing in the universes. Greater than survival, greater than love, greater even than the beauty it brings about. For without pain, there can be no pleasure. Without sadness, there can be no happiness. Without misery there can be no beauty. And without these, life is endless, hopeless, doomed and damned. ”

—HARLAN ELLISON

“Carpe Diem”

— HORACE

“Memento Mori”

— ANONYMOUS

PROLOGUE

NOVEMBER 5, 1999

11:15:00 — I drive my white Ford Econoline Van to the top, thirteenth floor of the parking garage on North Tampa Street. The driver's door logo implies I work with the Ballistic Services Company. From my earlier reconnaissance, I choose the last two spaces on the northeast corner, a location bounded by a high wall to the east and a three-foot wall to the north. This gives me shielding from the right, and a unobstructed view north toward downtown Tampa. Today I have a thick beard and dark reflective sunglasses. I'm wearing loose-fitting jeans, a long-sleeved Tampa Bay Lightning sweatshirt with an embroidered Vinny Lecavalier signature, and a reflective orange vest. I complete my disguise with a yellow construction hard hat and scuffed-up Timberland work boots. There are the distinct aromas of fried chicken, French fries, chili powder, and cumin drifting up from food trucks on the streets below.

11:18:02 — I unload four orange traffic cones, three six-foot tall sections of stand-up steel framing, and enough black Visqueen to provide perimeter cover. After assembling the frames, I clip the Visqueen in place and

position the cones. I remove a folding platform and a drag bag containing the rest of my *tools* from the van. Elapsed time: 14 minutes, 06 seconds.

11:32:08 — I assemble my shooting platform and rifle support tripod, placing them in position four feet back from the low wall. I outfit an M24 Remington Sniper Rifle, my favorite I nicknamed *Dire Fate*, with five steel-jacketed Winchester .338 Magnum cartridges in the internal magazine, confident I'll only need one. I complete my weapon assembly by mounting a Leupold Mark4 LR/T 10x40 Tactical Sniper Scope and Dark Earth Sound Suppressor. Elapsed time: 10 minutes, 12 seconds.

11:42:20 — Every aspect and every outcome commands my attention. The weather is perfect with moderate humidity and nominal wind. The air temperature is a cool sixty-eight degrees. At midday, this time of year, the sun's location is more southerly, placing it behind me and lighting my target. I took several weeks confirming the man always takes his Friday lunches at the Cigar City Pizza Parlor. I calculate the distance to be two hundred ten meters from my firing position. The target regularly enters by, or shortly before 12:00 p.m., and leaves within a minute or two of 12:45 p.m. I settle into my ready position. My plan: take him as he leaves the restaurant.

12:47:28 — Ninety-two minutes after parking, I execute my long-practiced military pre-shot checklist. Finger resting on trigger, I confirm a clear field of fire when, on this particular Friday, at exactly 12:47:50, my target exits the restaurant and stops directly behind a woman waiting for a traffic signal. She's waving to someone across the street. I couldn't chance waiting for a better shot. I take it. They both collapse to the sidewalk.

12:48:06 — After a moment's hesitation by those closest to the fallen victims, the reality of the situation crashes home. Panicking people

begin screaming and scrambling in all directions. I anticipated this pandemonium; confident it would delay a quick response by authorities.

13:02:22 — I pack my tools, remove the curtains and frames, stow the cones, and sweep any evidence of my presence in the garage. Pulling out of the parking space, the only reminder of my being there is a vague smell of burnt gunpowder. I pull a Tampa Bay Lightning ball cap over my forehead and drive out, turning south on Tampa Street. With my window down, the first responders' earsplitting horns compete with the pulsating screams of the police sirens. Checking my side-view mirror, I smile, pleased with the mayhem on the street three blocks behind me, as the radio plays Queen's *Who Wants To Live Forever*.

CHAPTER 1

OCTOBER 28, 1999
(EIGHT DAYS EARLIER)

THE NATIONAL HURRICANE Center issued a tropical storm warning threatening the eastern Caribbean islands and Florida. It was on a track forecast to hit the Cayman Islands, Cuba, and south Florida. The season had already been brutal, with three category three and four storms. They named this one Marcos. Current forecast tracks showed it passing south and east of Tampa, but one had it barreling right up I-75. Currently, NHC predicted the storm, with sustained winds of sixty knots, was likely to progress to category three once past Cuba.

DETECTIVE KYLE McNALLY sat on the condominium patio, holding the hand of his fiancée, Dr. Mykel Hartley. Their home offered a beautiful view of the Hillsborough River, the Tampa Bay Performing Arts Center, a burgeoning downtown skyline, and the University of Tampa's distinctive silver-topped Arabian minarets. At times like these, Kyle took the

world off his shoulders for a few hours. And so far, no sign of Marcos on the horizon.

“I’m sure fate had a hand in the good fortune that’s come our way, Kyle. I’ve never been happier or felt safer,” Mykel said.

“That was my promise. And, two weeks from now we’ll both be marrying our best friend. Sitting here beside you, with the glistening minarets across the river, I can’t deny the faith ancient Arabians held in fatalism; but whether it’s fate, fortune, or karma, my love, *carpe diem*, right?”

Mykel smiled and dabbed at the tears welling up from her sparkling azure-blue eyes, and said, “I confirmed our wedding plans with the pastor at the Unitarian Church today. When we visited, we loved the idyllic country setting, the charming arched chapel surrounded by old live oak trees. I gave him our small guest list, including your father Patrick, our friends Tony, Leo and his wife, Camille.”

“I’ve thought about that honey, and I think we should invite our friends Guillermo and his sister Rosalina from the restaurant.”

“I sorry I overlooked them. Remind me to bring an invitation in the morning.”

THEIR MOVE TO Tampa, Florida in early 1998, was the perfect choice. Kyle and Mykel planned it for nearly a year. She’d settled in peacefully since the trauma Francis Butler, aka the Slugger, triggered two years before. His brutal attack nearly killed her. She took comfort knowing he’d spend the rest of his life looking through windows barred with metal grates at Chicago-Read Hospital.

They pooled their savings to buy the condominium and a deck boat, moored at a slip on the river minutes from their home. She loved her position at Tampa General Hospital as a Medical Pathologist. Kyle opened his private investigation firm, Paladin Detective Agency, on 7th Avenue in nearby Ybor

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City.

This was another one of many peaceful evenings spent here on the balcony, sharing a bottle of wine, enjoying classical music.

“Can this last forever, Kyle?” Mykel said.

“I’m certain of it. And honey, together, forever will be a long, wonderful time,” Kyle replied, raising his glass to hers.

CHAPTER 2

OCTOBER 29, 1999
(SEVEN DAYS EARLIER)

KYLE AND MYKEL met outside the Sagua La Grande Cantina in Ybor City for breakfast. The owner, Guillermo Posada, befriended him soon after Kyle opened his agency on 7th Avenue. The restaurant was two blocks south on 5th Avenue.

The air inside the restaurant was thick with the nutty, chocolatey fragrance of coffee and fresh buttered Cuban bread toasting. While they waited to be seated, Mykel said, “I enjoyed the story Guillermo told of having bribed a high-ranking agent at the Cuban Embassy. He won Rosalina’s visa by serving the pliable bureaucrat lavish dinners for a full week. Shortly after, she was flying to the States. She’d recently escaped a toxic marriage from a loathsome, abusive man, a man Guillermo never approved of.”

Kyle nodded. “He’s very protective of his younger sister. He arranged for Rosa to attend American schools growing up. He wanted her to have the advantages he didn’t. They grew up in Sagua La Grande, Cuba, namesake of the restaurant.”

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The cantina was a crowded, noisy place during breakfast and lunch hours, with plates clattering and orders being called out. It also had a small private room off the main dining area where friends of Guillermo were invited to sit.

This morning, Guillermo, a slender man with skin the color of the coffee he brewed, a thick mustache, and a full head of dusty brown hair, greeted the two of them with his characteristic generous, smile. “Hola mis amigos, how are you both on this wonderful morning?”

“Couldn’t be better today, Guillermo. Mykel and I are here for your Cuban toast with ham and cheese, and Cafe con Leche.”

“Hi Guillermo. So good to see you,” Mykel said. “If you have a moment, could you answer a question that’s interested me for some time?”

“Si, with pleasure,” he answered, with a sparkle in his eyes.

“I’ve always admired the lovely wall murals on your walls, but never asked you about them. They must be special. Please tell me about them.”

“It would make me happy to,” he replied, gesturing toward the one in the main dining room. “This one show two lovers dancing and kissing. I name it Bolero, *the Dance of Love*. In Cuba, young people who are in love don’t go to a movie to be together. They stay home with family and dance all night. And, here,” he said, walking them into the Guadalupe Room, “is the bridge over the Sagua La Grande river, in the town where I come from.” Then, with a chuckle, “The name mean big mouse.

“Please, sit here where you can talk quietly. Now that you show interest, the name of this room, Guadalupe, mean *valley of the wolf*. A wolf is very protective of his family pack. But now, let me put in your order and have Rosa bring your coffee.”

“Have you heard the weather reports?” Kyle said.

“Si. That storm hit Cuba next. I am sorry now for them.”

“Marcos might hit us early next week. I read the last time was the Tampa Bay Hurricane eighty years ago. They said it was a Category four.”

Guillermo was shaking his head, rubbing the back of his neck and said, “This is a storm that worry us all. I never see one in this city, but in Cuba,

there were many. They are the angry face of Yemaya; Marcos mean ‘go to war’ in my language. I pray for the good people of my home country.”

“They got the name right,” Mykel said. “I’ll be praying too.

“Guillermo, Kyle and I have brought an invitation for Rosa and you. We’re hoping you’ll both come to our wedding in two weeks on the thirteenth.”

“This is very exciting! I must tell Rosa. Of course we will join you.”

Rosa delivered their coffees. “Hello, Mykel. It’s always nice to have you both here together. And Kyle, you *do* realize she’s truly your better half,” she said with a grin and a wink at Mykel. “I’m bringing you both a special coffee this morning. It’s one we only offer when Guillermo is occasionally inspired. It’s called Cortadito, and is a Cuban specialty that requires more elaborate preparation than the traditional Cuban Café. I guarantee you’ll both love it.”

Mykel admired Rosa: *She is a tall, attractive woman who looks ten years younger than her age. Her complexion is lighter than her brother’s, and she wears makeup sparingly—but doesn’t suffer for it. With a shapely figure and dazzling, raven-black hair, tied back, down to her waist, Mykel was stumped trying to imagine how Rosa remained single, being well past her first ‘bad’ marriage. And, the woman could keep her cool, even when the staff were overwhelmed, and ‘in the weeds.’ She’s proud, but not haughty; statuesque, and walks through the cantina like every step is intentional. She’d be a good find for any man.*

Rosalina’s eyes sparkled as she said, “Guillermo tells me you’ve invited us to your wedding. I’m so excited for you two! We’ll be there. It’s such a happy time and a perfect occasion to be shared with friends and family. Thank you for asking us.” Then she paused, smiled, and said, “I’ve spoken with Guillermo. You must allow us to provide food for your reception.”

“Oh please, we’re just happy you’re both coming Rosa. And, though I appreciate your kind offer, we’d never want to impose on you, but thank you for asking,” Mykel said.

“No no, you’re mistaken. It will be our honor Mykel. Our gift to you both. It’s no imposition. Let’s get together and decide on your menu.”

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THEIR BREAKFAST FINISHED; they discussed plans for the weekend. Kyle said, “There’s a new exhibit opening at the Dali Museum today. They’re displaying surrealists from the 1930’s and 40’s. How about we take the Floribbean Flow over there tomorrow, stop for lunch at The Landing, and walk to the exhibition?”

“I’m in. And after, while we’re in the neighborhood, let’s swing by the outdoor market for veggies and fruit on our way home. I’ll need one of those gigantic eggplants they sell. I’m dying for your eggplant parmigiana.”

“I hope that’s not all you’ve been *craving* lately,” he said, leaning over, leaving a tender peck on her cheek. “So it’s a date. And on Monday, I’ve invited Patrick over for drinks and dinner. It’ll be a good time to discuss the preparations for our wedding.”

“Good, that’ll also give us a chance to clarify *our* plans for *our* ceremony. He’s disappointed that we’re not marrying in a Catholic church. As much as he’d like it, I refuse to consider changing my faith.”

Leaving the restaurant, Kyle noticed men on a lumber truck unloading four-foot by eight-foot sheets of plywood at the business next door.

CHAPTER 3

OCTOBER 30TH,
1999 (SIX DAYS
EARLIER)

THE BLACK DRAGON Security Solutions Company was holding a Saturday morning meeting in the conference room on the 10th floor of the downtown Franklin Building. Present were the owner and CEO, Dominic Papadapolis, his partner Felix Hermann, Vice President of Marketing, and Scott Kaine, their Lead Programmer and Technical Support Manager.

“You’re here today, because our Year 2000, or ‘Y2K’, software issues appear to have stalled. Given our position as an industry leader in cybersecurity, it’s hard for me to believe we’re at risk. With only two months until the so-called millennial meltdown, we by God better get these problems resolved, and I mean immediately,” Papadapolis said, nostrils flaring.

“Scott, give me your worst-case sitrep on my software’s Y2K compliance worldwide.”

“We’re okay domestically, Mr. P, but there’s several of our middle and far eastern customers who’ve fallen behind. I’ve been pushing them

to fix their programs, but in those regions, I don't see any way they'll get it done by the new year unless someone lights a fire under their asses.

"I tell ya, I'm about as optimistic as a blind-folded man in front of a firing squad, Mr. P. First, the original programs you purchased, the ones I adapted, were written using the COBOL language. Locating competent coders in the U.S. is a challenge, but it's ten times tougher overseas. Second, the coding they *are* doing is sloppy. Despite several attempts, I can't seem to get those Arab and Cossack code jockeys on top of it. The worst offenders work at our Saudi and Russian sites. They believe shitty programming is somehow akin to epic poetry."

With a clamped jaw, and staring straight at Kaine, Papadapolis began rapping his pen on the table.

Kaine continued, "Trust me, it'd freak you out how many times I've caught them taking idiotic shortcuts ending with calculation errors, BSODs, and system crashes at those sites. I've tried everything to get them off their asses; but it's like trying to teach seals to string a Stradivarius. If they can't get it right before January first, those businesses will hit the shitter, and drag us down with them."

Perspiration beads shining on his forehead, he glanced back and forth at the faces of the men seated with him. "Y2K isn't just a problem for us. It's real and it's gonna be big. I've talked with a dozen IT shops and they all shared panic and doomsday forecasts with me, sir."

Felix Hermann leaned forward. "So tell us, Scott, what do we do to make sure this doesn't become a marketing problem for me? Do you need more help? We'll get it if it'll help."

"No, thanks though, Mr. H. I'll give you a list of those shops that have to fix their code so you two can put the fear of Beelzebub in their bosses. That'll help. They've all got my list of necessary corrections. Sadly, I suspect there's a greater than a twenty percent chance I'll be putting out fires well into January. Not exactly what I'd call a winning movie script, is it?"

One final time, Papadapolis rapped his pen loudly on the table and said, “No, and I agree. Meantime, bring us your list of those trouble sites.

“Oh, and Kaine, are we prepared in case Hurricane Marcos tracks here to Tampa? It’s a Cat 3 now, passing Cuba, and at least one of the tracks shows it making it here.”

“You bet Mr. P, all our hurricane preps are in place; sandbags are ready, the generator is gassed up, and we have backups secured off-site, so there’s nothing to worry about.”

“Good. That’s all for now. Wait in your office while Felix and I decide our next move.”

Scott nodded. “Yes sir.”

FELIX SHOOK HIS head. “Dominic, right from the start, you gave our customers management and control of their own software updates and maintenance. That move led to a trend, and it’s now industry standard. But we’re competing with the largest players in the cybersecurity marketplace, and, as the frontrunner, we can’t afford to fail. Frankly, I’m worried. Have you got any ideas how we resolve it before January 1st?”

“That’s why we’re here, Felix.”

“And, let me ask, do you completely trust Kaine’s judgement about the extent of the problem? Lately he’s been behaving oddly. I don’t need to speak of his recent *interesting* wardrobe choices: that gaudy turban hat and parachute pants. Not exactly business appropriate, is it? And, the number of times I’ve passed his vacant office during business hours seems like a problem needing a fix. Do you agree?

Dom nodded. “Yes Felix, but I’m confident he’s okay. He’s told me he broke up recently with his longtime girlfriend. I suspect maybe that, and the pressure from this Y2K thing, is taking a toll on his normally dependable performance.” Then, adjusting his tie, “But don’t worry, I’m keeping a close eye on him.

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“Back to the Y2K problem, it’s imperative for us to visit these troubled customer sites and notify them how serious this is. If they balk, we need to threaten them. If they don’t meet our Y2K standards by January first, I’ll cutoff their usage of, and support for, my Dragon Security Software suite. At that point, if it comes to it, I’ll eat the losses!

“So Felix, here’s what I need you to do: be prepared to travel Monday. I’m sending you to my Arabian accounts in Riyadh. Make the arrangements and forward your itinerary to me by this afternoon. When you return, we’ll talk before I fly to Moscow to meet with my Russian accounts there.”

His face twisted for a split-second before barking, “You *will* be ready to go by Monday, right, Felix?” Dom barked.

CHAPTER 4

NOVEMBER 1, 1999
(FOUR DAYS EARLIER)

GLANCING SKYWARD AS Kyle grabbed the mail from the box downstairs, there was an ominous line of black clouds moving in from the south. Marcos was now a Cat 4 storm, stalled 200 miles south of Tampa and threatening landfall at Naples. It had practically flattened George Town in the Caymans, and left a devastating trail through Cuba, passing just west of Havana. NOAA forecasters still had one odious path heading directly for Tampa.

Tampa earned its “Cigar City” nickname due to a surge of immigrants from Cuba, Spain, Italy, and Germany in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Vicente Martinez Ybor, a Cuban cigar maker and factory owner, was one of the first to settle here. Over the following decades, the cigar industry boomed, with over 100 factories producing millions of cigars each year.

A number of distinct social clubs—El Centro Espanol, El Centro Asturiano, La Union Martf-Maceo, and the Deutscher-Americaner Club—were built to serve the factories’ newly-arriving workforce. Though

most of the factories were now closed, their unique architectures contributed to the growing gentrification of Ybor's neighborhoods. Kyle appreciated the Cuban influenced ambience and pace of the area, including the near-constant presence of roosters and hens wandering the streets.

He walked into the offices of the Paladin Detective Agency on the 2nd floor of the historic Simovitz building on East 7th Avenue. The four rooms included a large reception area, two offices with doorways to outdoor, over-the-sidewalk balconies, and arch-topped windows.

Mykel had decorated the offices and suggested, "You'll need wall-to-wall carpeting for warmth, period art reflecting Ybor's historic Cigar City past, and sturdy, comfortable Craftsman furniture."

Kyle would have been content with bare wood floors, metal desks and steel file cabinets—*bulletproof stuff*. As he surveyed the offices, the only thing missing was a receptionist/office manager. The fast-growing business would require him to initiate that hire soon.

Stepping out on his balcony, the sky had gone slate gray, and the wind began whipping in intermittent blasts out of the south. The ringing phone drew him back to his office.

"Paladin Detective Agency, Kyle McNally speaking."

The caller hesitated briefly before speaking. "Uh. Oh. Hello. I'm sorry, but I expected an answering machine. They're so damn common these days. I guess I've come to expect them," the caller said in an impatient tone.

"I'm happy to surprise you, ma'am. How can I help you?" Kyle said.

"My name is Jolene Papadapolis, and I need to hire a private detective to find the people who want to kill me."

"Kill you? That's a serious accusation. Have you gone to the police for help yet?"

"Yes, I've spoken with them. They aren't taking me seriously; even after I got run off the road last week on Bayshore. They suggested the accident was my fault since I'd had a couple of cocktails. But that's not true. I was in perfect control of my vehicle."

Kyle opened a new case folder and began taking notes. "Ms. Papadapolis, please give me the date and time of the accident. I'll follow-up with the police."

"It happened last Saturday night, the thirtieth, at around eight o'clock. I'm driving south on Bayshore Boulevard, and a car pulls beside me and cuts right into me. It was me or him and I wasn't in any mood to play chicken, so I swerved off of the road, right into a tree."

"Did you recognize the driver? Were there any passengers in the car?"

"No, it was dark. I was startled and afraid. Can't say I got a good look at them."

"Did you require any medical attention?"

"No."

"Are there other reasons you suspect your life may be in danger?"

"Well, yes there are. I've been followed the past few weeks. It's never the same person, someone different every time I spot them."

"Did you recognize any of these stalkers?"

"No. Don't know any of them. But believe me, Mr. McNally, my life is in danger and I need your help."

"Did the police file a report?"

"Oh sure. No word back from them though. From the way they talked, I'd bet my report ended up in their litter box."

"Have you spoken with anyone else about the stalking?"

"Yeah, my husband Dominic. But he says I'm probably imagining the whole thing. He rarely takes me seriously."

"Even so, I'd like to talk with him. He may have some useful information. Would it be alright if I contact him?"

"Yeah, I suppose so."

Inspecting his haphazardly notated schedule book, Kyle said, "Good. Mrs. Papadapolis, the earliest I'm available is tomorrow afternoon. That's assuming Hurricane Marcos doesn't change course and head this way. If we can't make it then, I'll schedule another day."

"No, no no. I'll be there; to hell with the weather," she said with a nervous

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chuckle. “I don’t want to spend one more day in fear. Thank you, Mr. McNally. I feel better already. And please, call me Jo.”

“Alright Jo. I’ll look for you tomorrow at two.”

CHAPTER 5

NOVEMBER 1, 1999
(FOUR DAYS EARLIER)

PATRICK MCNALLY, KYLE'S step-father and retired Interpol investigator, hung his dripping jacket on a hall tree by the door. Arms spread wide and, on her tiptoes, Mykel greeted him giving him a hug. "Hello Patrick, it's so good to see you. Please tell Kyle and I all about your trip back home to Ireland last month. I hope your time there provided you with many good days for drying," she punctuated with a wink.

"Aye lass, I enjoyed many a fine day. It was good to get back over the pond and reconnect with some of the lads from my years at Interpol. Had a first-rate time with them, though 'tween you and me, I'm of the opinion that most of them have become flippin' eejits. They're all either divorced and pretending they're twenty-one again, or they spend their days at Fairyhouse Racecourse bettin' the ponies. Some sad lot they've become. Don't get me wrong, I still love 'em, but I can't be hangin' around all day drinkin' stout in the pubs like I used to."

With a bemused smile, Mykel said, "So are you ready for our big day? Our wedding is on the 13th, a week from Saturday."

For a second, the creases around Patrick's eyes deepened. *The thirteenth. Now there's a fateful date.* Then, shaking his head, "Don't you worry lass, I'll not be forgettin' it."

Kyle entered the room with cocktails.

Turning to Kyle, Patrick continued. "Son, this is truly the best idea you've had in years. Mykel's sure a real sharp gal. You got lucky with this bonnie lass, my boy! Let me offer a toast to both yours and Mykel's future happiness." As they tipped their glasses, he continued, "*Blodh airgead i do phoca agat i gconai, bean mhaith le gra, agus aoibh ghaire ar d'aghaidh.* "

Kyle caught Mykel's puzzled expression, and explained, "It's an Irish toast. It loosely translates to, 'May you always have money in your pocket, a good woman to love, and a smile on your face.'"

"What a lovely sentiment. Thank you, Patrick," Mykel said.

"I'm certainly hoping that nasty bit of weather, Marcos, they're callin' it, doesn't ruin your plans for the wedding."

"It's now a Cat 4. Winds up to 130 knots. We should know in the next day or two if we need to change plans," Kyle said.

"Right now, I'm sayin' prayers that doesn't come to pass."

They sat and chatted for another hour, with Patrick sharing tales from his visit back home, when Kyle looked at Mykel and said, "Our reservations at the Columbia Restaurant are in an hour. If you need to get ready, this would be a good time."

Kyle joined Mykel in the bedroom. "We haven't really talked about our wedding plans with Patrick yet. Do you want me to bring it up, or would you prefer to?"

"Let's play it by ear."

Sounding like a distant locomotive engine's horn, the wind whistled through their balcony screens, and the sky overhead took on an eerie shade of green. Hurricane Marcos was blowing up the skirt of the Cigar City.

SEATED AT THE restaurant, their waitress came to the table and stood beside Kyle. Resting a hand on his shoulder, she said, “Good evening, friends. Welcome to the Columbia Restaurant. My name is Carmen, and I’ll be your server tonight.” Bending down and speaking directly to Kyle, she asked, “And for you, sir, what may I bring?”

“Thank you, Carmen, tonight we’ll start with a bottle of your Monte Real Gran Reserva.”

Carmen made note of his order, then smiled broadly, “As you wish, Senor!”

After Carmen left, Mykel grinned playfully, “It looks like the McNally charm is still ringing the ladies’ bells, Kyle—another reminder of how fortunate I am.”

“You never need to worry about my love, Mykel.”

With the meal orders placed, wine opened, glasses poured, and toasts made, Mykel bit her lip before speaking. “Patrick, Kyle and I want to discuss our decision to marry in the Unitarian Church. We’re well aware you’d prefer a Catholic ceremony.”

“Tell me again why you’re not havin’ your vows consecrated by a priest in the Holy Catholic Church.”

Kyle took Mykel’s hand as she replied. “We made our choice knowing that God isn’t present in only one faith or in one church. We believe in a divine being, but we’re not committed to the sacred traditions of your church. We’ll follow the bible’s teachings, but we agree the Catholic scriptures aren’t the only path to spiritual grace.”

Kyle nodded with a faint smile as he said, “The Unitarian church where we’re marrying is open to people of all denominations. They make no demands on a strict adherence to a single doctrine, or rigorous rules and the ceremonial rites of your church.”

Patrick’s eyes widened. “Not Catholic? Tis’ sad. But, given you two agree, I’d be a sore fool to fuss more about it. May God’s blessings be on both of you.”

The waitress returned with their appetizers. Patrick smiled and raised

both hands in submission, signaling the conversation needed no further discussion. *May the good Lord help them. Among their choice of church, the inauspicious date of the ceremony, and Hurricane Marcos, I hope this doesn't end up a bad dose for the two of them.*

Second Horsman 's Arrived!
World That Was Now Crashes Down.
Your People IT's Failed...
Don't Guess Who I Am, Just Ask.
- Y2K

NOVEMBER 1ST, 1999 (FOUR DAYS EARLIER)

IT WAS JUST after nine p.m. when I park on the street that fronts DeSoto Park in south Ybor. I roll down my window, kill the headlights, and turn off the engine. Though Hurricane Marcos was still hours away, the air is sopping wet. Its outer bands noisily rustle nearby Cabbage Palm fronds. The odor coming from the bay waters beside the park combined with the atmosphere leaves a musty, moldy stench in my nose.

I sit for several minutes, waiting. I'd stopped a hundred feet in front of the lone, late-night pedestrian. He moves with a noticeable hitch in his gait and struggles with a two-wheeled grocery cart. Under the dim lighting of antique street lamps, He's wearing a ski cap and multiple sweatshirts, the top one imprinted with 'Just Do It,' and a swoop. How ironic, I recall the fabled origin of the corporate motto *Nike* adopted. When the prison guards asked double murderer Gary Gilmore if he had any last words before facing his firing squad, he answered, 'Let's do it.' I always admired Gilmore's style, his gutsy acceptance of death, and the poetic genius I found in his verse, *The Land Lord!* When the homeless man hobbles to within twenty feet of the car, I get out and pop the trunk. "Hey buddy, I've got some old clothes here. They should be about your size. I didn't make it in time to get them to the Goodwill store. Take your pick of 'em."

Stepping back, he grumbled, "Mister, I ain't lookin' for no trouble." He wipes his nose on his sleeve before holding his hands up, hoping to ward me off.

"No, no, no. Don't worry. I have a ten-dollar bill here I can spare if you're hungry."

"Gotta say I missed my meal at the shelter today. So, yeah, I guess I wouldn't say no to a couple bucks."

"You bet. Come on over and take a look what I've got in the trunk. There's even a jacket that'll keep you warm and dry if this weather gets any worse. There's a storm coming."

The homeless man takes a hesitant step toward the car. As he does, I draw my double-edged switchblade knife and press the release slide. Hearing

the mechanical, spring-loaded double click of the out-front blade, his eyes fly wide open, though too late for him to react. He lets out a dreadful cry as I take a step forward, reach out, making two deft swipes with the knife; the first, a powerful stroke from the right severs his trachea, and the second, a backhand from the left, opens his right carotid artery. Stunned, he falls to his knees, choking and gasping, unable to utter a sound. I step back to avoid the spray of blood from his neck and admire my handiwork as his remarkably meaningless life drains from him.