

SALVATION BOULEVARD

CHAPTER ONE:

Ahmad looked like hell.

He also looked like a kid. I knew he was twenty-one. But if he'd been cleaned up and had civilian clothes on and I saw him in the hallways at my daughter's high school, I could've believed he was sixteen, seventeen years old.

That was what Manny wanted me to see. Manny had a cause. And for some reason, he wanted me to join up. I didn't understand why. It was unnecessary. Pay me, I do my job. Causes are dangerous, everyone knows that.

Right now, the kid was in an orange jumpsuit, his wrists and ankles manacled, connected by a chain that connected to another chain that wrapped around his waist. He had prison issue slippers on his feet. He was scared, as scared as I've ever seen anyone. And he'd been hurt. He had bruising on the right side of his face and he had trouble moving and when Manny reached out to shake his manacled hand he flinched.

"Easy son, easy," I said, soft and slow, talking halfway between the way you talk to a person and a wild animal you're trying to coax to your side.

He looked at me, his eyes dark as the night and wet as the rain, he couldn't help himself, the tears started to flow. It happens that way, if you've been brutalized enough, the first gentle words you hear, the tears start to flow.

"Come on," I said and put my hand on his arm to lead him to the yellow plastic chair. They'd provided us with three chairs, no table. They'd taken away even Manny's pens and given

him a felt tip for making notes. Pencils were too dangerous. This was not normal. Usually there was a table, bring your own pen, tape recorder, pads.

The CO that brought him in was Leander Peale. He was mostly called Lee, sometimes Leap or Leapy. He worked prisoner escort a lot and both Manny and I knew him. He was born again. Saved him from a life of crank before he lost all his teeth. He still rode a bike and had a 'Born to Lose' tat beneath his uniform. He used to have an imp with an enlarged penis that said 'Satan's Spawn' but he'd spent some serious dollars having it lasered off. He was an okay guy. Not an asshole. He knows that we all have to live together, we all have our jobs.

In addition to Lee, in his CO uniform, there were two suits. They didn't introduce themselves. Manny said, "Who are you?"

The older one, a homely man with twenty year old pits of teen acne still marking his face, and thin straw hair, muttered, "Homeland Security," from between thin grudging lips. But who knows what that means. When I put my hand on Ahmad's arm, he and his younger partner, an iron pumper, thick in the chest, both hunched like they were ready to pounce if the kid went berserk or I tried to spring him.

"Back off," Manny said, dismissively.

Ahmad dropped to his knees and put his hands on my leg. He hugged my thigh and wept. "Save me, please save me from these people."

That was too much for the Homeland Security guys to accept. No crying, no touching, no accusations. So they moved. They were coming for him. Manny got between us and them. He looked at them with the authority of a man who sues people for a living and wins.

“They are beating me,” both hands now on my thigh, holding on like I was a life raft, looking up at me like I was the keys to the kingdom of heaven. “They stick things in my ass. I am innocent. Tell my mother, please tell my mother, I’m innocent. Don’t let them beat me anymore. Please.”

Manny looked at Lee.

“Not me,” Lee said. We have to parse these things. He didn’t say it never happened. He didn’t even say, ‘he was resisitin’ like he would have said if it had been some other CO’s being overzealous. In the circumstances it was as good as jumping on a pine box, pointing a long boned forefinger and screaming, ‘Yes, they did that to him!’

“Alright, this is over,” the older of the two said.

Manny flipped open his cell phone and took the guy’s picture. Took both their pictures, then took Ahmad’s picture, holding my knee and sobbing like a boy who’s just been raped.

“He’s lying,” the older one said, “He’s lying, they train them to say that. And weep and cry.”

“He had to be questioned, what if he was planning more murders? What if it was part of a plot? What about that?”

“Tell me your names,” Manny said. He’s got lots of voices. This one sounded like George Patton on a bad day. “I want names and numbers. Give me some badge numbers.”

“We don’t answer to you.”

“Why don’t we all back off, guys,” Lee said.

“Back way the hell off,” Manny said. “I want to talk to my client. I want the privacy to which he and I am entitled. And I want your assurances this room is not wired. And believe me,

if I have any cause to do so, I will see to it that I ask you again under oath. Now let me talk to my client.”

“Come on,” I said, trying to lift the kid up. He didn’t want to let go. “Come on,” I said, “You have to sit down and tell us what’s going on.”

CHAPTER TWO:

Islamic warriors martyr themselves in order to kill infidels.

There's a born again Christian ruling the West who says he gets his orders from God and he's running a Crusade. It might as well be the Twelfth Century.

The corpse in this book should be God.

But He lives.

The words belonged to the dead man. His name was Nathaniel MacLoed. He was a professor of philosophy at the University of the Southwest, the largest institution of higher learning in the state, the largest between Texas and California, for that matter.

A bullet had gone through his head. It had entered from his right temple and exited near the nexus of the left temporal, parietal and frontal bones.

The words, which became, in effect, his final words, were on the opening page of a manuscript, found in front of him, leaning against his computer screen, the foot of the page stopped by the keyboard.

This is a great mystery.

Contrary to popular wisdom, it's relatively easy to disprove the existence of God. At least of a meaningful, beneficent God.

Furthermore, we have, during recent decades, accumulated enough new knowledge of the universe, and more particularly of ourselves, to understand why we believe. And why it is so important to us, important enough to kill over.

A gun had been found on the floor beside the chair, where it would naturally have fallen from his right hand if he had shot himself. It was a relatively rare and unusual gun and it was owned by MacLoed. The stippling and powder burns around the entry wound indicated that the barrel had been held against his head when the shot was fired.

In short, it looked like a self-inflicted wound and when he was first found, the police called it a suicide.

A dead white man is not quite as exciting as a missing white girl, but it's big enough. Especially an educated, upper middle class white man, not a piece of white trash shot up in a raid on a meth lab. It got a lot of local and regional coverage. The news shows brought in all sorts of commentators to puff out the story, psychologists, suicide counselors, student counselors, spokespersons from the university. Because of the God and atheism angle they brought in religious figures too. Pastor Paul Plowright, who runs the biggest church in the state, got the most air time.

"Is anyone surprised," Pastor Plowright said to the anchor of WSVX's Six O'Clock News, "That an atheist committed suicide?"

"The despair an atheist must feel is unimaginable to a believer. The emptiness, the hollowness inside. And, of course, atheists have no moral center. To them everything is relative, anything is allowed, so why not commit suicide? They don't understand that life is sacred. Theirs is a culture of death, ours is a culture of life."

The anchor asked him, "What about his statement that it's easy to disprove the existence of God?"

Pastor Plowright smiled gently. Viewers could see he was restraining his contempt out of respect for the dead. “Unbelievers have been saying that for thousands of years. And they convince no one.”

“What about this book of his ... ”

“Bob, how can you disprove something that exists?”

Plowright was far less restrained in his Sunday sermon and in his television and radio broadcasts. The manuscript, he said, was proof positive that there is a war against Christianity. The front lines are at our ‘so-called great universities.’ The academic elites are Satan’s storm troopers.

The student newspaper, the USW Clarion Call, said he’d been very popular with his students, that he’d been politically active, especially in the search for peace in the Middle East, and most recently in the fight against the privatization of the state owned university’s 5.3 billion dollar endowment fund.

It also published the rest of that first page, including this:

Morality is always the red flag of believers. If we remove God, they exclaim, everyone immediately dives into a drug addled orgy of degeneracy, excess, and criminal irresponsibility and the world goes to hell in a hand basket

That’s not true, on the face of it.

There have been numerous societies throughout history – as there still are today – without a monotheistic God, and some with no gods at all, and they have been quite as moral and orderly as Jewish, Christian and Islamic states. Nor is there any correlation within a given society between the fervency of belief and moral conduct.

Actually, a clear look at morality is the strongest argument against God.

It was as if there was a debate going on between a dead man and a live one.

They themselves would have called it something more than a debate, a battle for souls.

It's natural to assume that a living man has all the advantages over a dead man. But certainly not since the invention of the written word. Nathaniel MacLoed hadn't done very well against the Bible, a book far older than his own, its authors long dead. How would Pastor Paul Plowright fare against Professor MacLoed's pages?

Absolutely, the opening round went to Plowright.

But then the police suddenly announced that MacLoed's death had not been a suicide. It had been a murder. A suspect had been arrested.