

EXCERPT (CHAPTER 1 – 4)

My Life As A Sperm

One Man's Quest to Save the World

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WILLIAM DARRAH WHITAKER

QAV Media

Las Vegas

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents, or characters interacting with real persons is either a product of the author's imagination or amazingly coincidental (but still not meant to be a factual representation). Repeat after me - none of this really happened.

My Life As A Sperm

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Editor: Cate Hogan

Cover Graphic: Thorsten Schmitt

Cover Design: Pradeep (FiverrCreator)

Contact Info:

www.wdarrahwhitaker.com
www.buddyprice-agent.com

darrah@wdarrahwhitaker.com
buddy@buddyprice-agent.com

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Chapter One

“My name is Buddy Price, and I died twice yesterday.”

The nurse didn’t react; instead, she focused on switching my IV bag.

“How’s that for a first line? Gotta hook ‘em or you’re toast.”

She tossed the old bag into a nearby trash can. “Mmm hmm.”

I couldn’t wait until Stacey showed. At least, she’d pay attention.

“The first time I died, I was gone for over two minutes.”

The nurse hung my new IV, wiped her hands on her uniform and peered down at me over her granny glasses. “You need to take it easy, Mr. Price. You’re just lucky to be alive.”

“I told you I saw God.”

“Yes, you did.” She patted my shoulder. “Now get some rest.”

I tried again. “He sent me back because I have a job to do.”

“That’s what you keep saying.” Her rubber-soled clogs made an annoying squeak with each step toward the door. “I’ll check back in a little while.”

“Not the least bit curious?”

Apparently, she wasn’t. She left me to ponder my continued existence in my antiseptic-white hospital room, devoid of all sensory stimulation except for a bedside table, two bare wood chairs and a TV tucked in the corner near the ceiling. I switched it on with the remote, tried a few channels,

looking for something entertaining and finally gave up. You'd think with the prices they charged, you'd get more than basic cable.

Fortunately, a few minutes later, Stacey arrived.

"Oh my god, you look awful."

That was the first thing out of her mouth, not that it wasn't true. I'm sure I looked like shit. Who doesn't after getting rammed by a Tahoe going fifty?

"I got dressed up just for you." I shifted my leg, trying to reduce its dull throb.

"Come on. You're not dressed up at all."

Stacey's a loyal assistant and has been with me the past five years, but she's not necessarily the sharpest tool in the shed. Yeah, cliché, but when it fits, it fits. Anyway, she tolerates me which says a lot for her patience. I gotta like that about her.

"Ready?" I said.

She hung her oversized handbag on the back of one of the chairs. "Are you sure you're feeling okay for this?"

"I'm breathing, aren't I?"

"Mr. Zimmerman told me to let you rest," she said, pulling out her notepad and pen. "So you can't tell anyone."

I winked. "It'll be our little secret."

She maneuvered the chair closer and sat. "Okay. Ready."

"My name is Buddy Price, and I died twice yesterday. The first time I died, it was for over two min—"

"Hold on." She scribbled on her notepad. "I need another pen."

"Yeah, go ahead." I shifted my leg again. "You know, Stace, thirteen years I've worked in the Industry and, in that time, I've gotten a bit of a reputation."

My leg hadn't been broken in the accident, but I received a helluva charley horse. Walking, well, limping around earlier this morning had helped, so I pulled myself out of bed to try again while she fished inside her purse.

She looked up from her search. "Are you sure you're okay doing that?"

"Yeah, I'm fine," I said, dragging the IV stand with me toward the window. "It's funny what you think about when you're lying in the back of an ambulance." I steadied myself with my free hand on the window sill and turned. "Like the fact that no one gives a shit."

“No.” She popped in a stick of gum. “That’s not true. A lot of people care.”

“See any flowers in the room?”

“It’s early. No one knows what happened.”

“Sure they do.” I pointed toward *The Enquirer* sitting on the edge of my bed. “But we can talk about that later. Let’s get back on track.”

“I’m ready.” She presented a new pen and blew a nice, pink bubble in celebration.

“I got T-boned in the intersection of Robertson and Santa Monica. I think somebody—”

“I already know what happened. You told me this morning when you called.”

“Come on, Stace. This is for posterity.”

“Never heard of him.”

I held my tongue and reminded myself she was brilliant when it came to picking winner scripts. “Just write it down. I’ll introduce you two later.”

“Okay. Go on.”

“I think someone famous was eating lunch at the Robertson Deli because the paparazzi swarmed. Some of them must have figured they were gonna get their very own Princess Di photo.”

“I bet I know who those would be,” she said with a quick smile.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Well, when you need them, you’re nice, but, otherwise... I don’t think Hollywood Bob likes you very much. Or Jim Dandy. Or Zoom Lindsay. Or Spiderman.”

“Okay, I get it. I get it.” I waved her off. “Let’s get back to my story.”

She nodded.

“So I remember lying half out of the car with all these guys shouting at me, ‘Over here. Over here.’ I’m glad I wasn’t in one of those eco matchbox jobs or I’d have really been messed up.”

“You want me to write down which car you were driving?”

“No, that’s not important.” I rubbed the left side of my head, my fingers running along a patch of unfamiliar smoothness where hair used to be. “Where was I?”

“They were taking your picture.”

“Right.” I sank into the other chair. “When I revived the first time, one asshole was standing right over the paramedic’s shoulder snapping away.

He's the one who took that picture." The front page of the tabloid showed my eyes bugging out from the defibrillator. "I should get a commission."

She picked up *The Enquirer* to get a better look. "Well, at least, he got your good side."

"Stace, there's no good side when you're dead."

"Yeah, I guess so," she said, tossing the paper down.

"To tell you the truth, I was pretty upset when I died."

"How can you be upset if you're dead?"

I didn't feel like getting into it with her. "You know what, you're right."

She gave me a big, red-lipped smile.

"Let's say, I was *disappointed*." My leg signaled it was time to move again. I struggled to my feet and set the door as my next destination. "There was no white light for me, no tunnel with relatives cheering me to the finish line. I've read where people say they got all warm and fuzzy. Not me. All I got was darkness."

"That's not good."

"Tell me about it."

"Were you scared?"

"I wasn't there long enough." I reached the door and turned. "They brought me back. Hurt like a motherfucker, too."

"One time I stuck my fingernail file in an electrical socket and that hurt sooo much." She squinted as she seemed to relive the experience.

"Why in the world did you – never mind. Can I finish?"

She readied her pen. "I'm waiting."

"Geez, where was I? These drugs are doing a number on me."

"You were in a car accident."

"Great." I grimaced, but not because of the pain. "Thanks for that."

"No problem," she said, wiggling a little in her chair.

I remembered where I was as I limped back toward the window. "So, I'm driving along talking on my cell with Ethel Silvers. You know, that actress I'm trying to sign from...from..."

"*I was a Teenage Vampire.*"

"Yeah, we were talking about changing her name. No one's going to make it in this business with a name like Ethel."

"Ethel Merman."

"What?"

"Or Ethel Barrymore? Wasn't she somebody, too?"

I glanced over my shoulder. “Stacey?”

“Sorry.” She waggled her hand at me and suppressed a smile. “Mind?”

I grappled with the back of my hospital gown. Failing to close the gap, I turned to face her. “You’re not going to make it in this town with an old lady name, no matter how gorgeous you are. I was telling her that people don’t see sexy with a name like Ethel, and that’s when I got hit. You know who the other driver was?”

Stacey shook her head.

I raised my right hand. “Marty Schwartz.”

“Marty? You’re kidding.”

“Small world, isn’t it?”

Marty was a guy at ICA who I had butted heads with over some projects. A world-class dick.

“He went through his windshield and landed in the crosswalk right in front of Keanu Reeves. He handed Keanu his card and then died. I have it from a very reliable source he was coked out of his mind.” The throbbing in my leg moved up to my head so I sidestepped toward the bed.

“How would you know he did all that? Well, okay, maybe you already knew about the coke, but how would you know what he did on the crosswalk?”

“You’ll understand as soon as I get there.”

She tapped her pen against her notepad. “I don’t know about that.”

I climbed back into bed. “I’m lost again.”

“Keanu Reeves.”

“Let’s pick it up at the hospital. Okay, the next thing I know I’m in the ER getting patched up. The doctor tells me my left leg might be broken, some ribs were probably cracked and I had a little swelling on the brain which they would have to drill...” I pointed at my newly acquired bald patch, “...to relieve the pressure. While he’s talking, I look over at this nurse who’s there and I’m thinking, yeah, Doc, I’m lucky to be alive. I wouldn’t want to miss out on a sight like that. You should have seen the casabas on her.”

“I hope you don’t get mad, but I’m dying for a cigarette. Are we going to take a break soon?”

“Hang on. I’m just getting to the good stuff.”

“Because you’re just being gross now.”

“What can I say?” I said. “I’m a sucker for a pretty face.”

“What’s new?”

“Okay, back to me. They wrapped my leg, which wasn’t broken after all, pumped me with painkillers, and I go and die again. Everything just goes dark. I’m thinking, shit, this is ridiculous. But then I start feeling this intense pressure, and I’m shot through this tunnel toward a white light. I’m feeling all warm and fuzzy so I’m okay with it. I don’t see anybody waving me on like you’re supposed to, but I’m thinking at least if I’m dead, I’m not going to be in the dark for the rest of my life.”

“That’s funny.”

“What’s funny?”

“You said for the rest of your life.” She pointed her pen at me. “It’s funny because you’re dead.”

“Okay, okay, figure of speech. Change that if it makes you happy. Anyway, I’m moving right along thinking I’m going to God, and that’s a stretch for me. I’ll be the first to admit I’m not the most religious guy. I don’t think I’ve gone to church except when somebody died or got married. What’s the difference, you know? But along the way, I feel like it’s getting harder to move along. I know I need to get to the light, but there just isn’t anything left in the tank.”

“Well, you aren’t in the best shape.”

I couldn’t resist a quick appraisal in the mirror across the room. “Yeah, I know. I know.” I smoothed out my bed hair, what was left of it. “But that doesn’t have anything to do with anything. Come on, Stace. Let me get this out.”

“I’m just saying. You ought to take better care of yourself.”

“I’m concentrating on this white light when I look over and see I’m not the only one there. A bunch of other guys are swimming along with me.”

“You were swimming?”

“Yeah, swimming. And, listen to this, one of the guys next to me is none other than Marty Schwartz. He looks over and says, ‘Sorry about hitting you, Buddy.’ Can you believe the nerve of that guy? He just killed me and all I get is that.”

“Yeah, well, what else could he say?”

“And, he goes on about how God’s got this warped sense of humor because the one time he gets a chance to chat up Keanu Reeves, he ends up dead. See, that’s how I know about Keanu.”

“You could have read it somewhere.”

“No, I’m telling you. This happened.”

“Sure, Buddy.”

“There’s something else. I’m not in my body anymore.”

“Well, that makes sense because you’re dead.”

“Yeah, but get this. I’m a sperm.”

“A what?”

“A sperm. A bona fide, Grade-A sperm.”

“A sperm?” Her frown confirmed she didn’t believe a word.

“As God is my witness, and I can say that because God *was* my witness.”

“This is all sounding crazy.”

“I’m a sperm and I see that Marty and I and this other kid are the only ones left, and we’re doing all that we can to get to that white light. That light, it turns out it’s God, and he’s holding this little egg in his hand. Well, it was big compared to me, but in God’s hand, it was small. God’s got some height.”

“You were a sperm?” Stacey’s frown only grew deeper.

“Go with it.”

“Yeah, I’ll go with it,” she said, shaking her head and blowing another bubble.

“Anyway, he looks down at the three of us and says, ‘Who of you are worthy of another chance?’ Marty, of course, pipes up and says that he’s the guy for the job. Just like Marty. How many clients has he tried to steal from us?”

“Lots.”

“So Marty starts in with God, asking him about his robe, where he got it, that his sandals are looking very chic. He tells Him how he’s repping some kid who did *Jesus Christ Superstar* in community theater and now he’s making him millions. Like that means something.”

“I didn’t know sperm could talk.”

“But I keep my mouth shut, because it’s God and I’m still freaking out a little. Well, the guy to my right is this kid from Cleveland. Don’t ask me how I know, but I just know.”

“How *did* you know?”

“Are you listening to me? I said I knew.”

“Okay, Buddy. You don’t have to bite my head off.”

“Yeah, sorry.” I took a deep breath. “Try not to ask any more questions until I’m done, okay?” I waited for a nod and then I continued. “This kid’s

pretty depressed because he hadn't gotten a fair break. He died right before his prom and, apparently, his date was going to put out."

"Again, you just knew that."

I ignored her. "Marty finishes his spiel and God moves over to me. I'm thinking to myself, what angle can I play? And then it comes to me. I say, 'God, I know I've made a bunch of mistakes in my life. I know I don't treat people right. I'm selfish and vain and the seven deadly sins are sitting on the top shelf of my refrigerator at home. So, you know what, God, it's all up to you. Whatever decision you make, I'll understand.'

"Then, I told Him, 'Personally, I think this kid here deserves a second chance. He's still a virgin.' And God smiled at me. Sure, I'm trying to pull one over on Him, hoping He might like me for being such a good guy, but, Stace, that smile. I've never seen anything like it. And then, He goes, 'I agree with you, Buddy.'

"Sure, I blew the flip, but, at that point, I didn't care. God's smile is spectacular. It makes you think crazy things."

"Yeah, like I said earlier, crazy," Stacey said as her pen hovered motionless over the page.

"You writing this down?"

"Sure." She blew another bubble.

"God rubs His hand on his chin and gets all serious and says, 'You may be just the man I'm looking for.' Of course, I'm thinking maybe He's recognized my talents and wants to put me in charge of something like Head Gatekeeper or Angel Wrangler. But He looks down at me and says, 'I'm going to send you back.' And then, boom, here I am."

"Unbelievable."

"But all true."

"Have you told anybody else this?"

"No, you're the first."

She lowered the notepad to her lap. "I'd keep it that way."

"But it happened."

"Why would He give you another chance?"

"Didn't I tell you?"

"No," she whispered. "Probably the drugs."

"He said He'd send me back under two conditions. I had to change my life. Be a better person. He told me not too many people get another chance, so don't blow it."

"It doesn't sound like much is changing there," Stacey replied. "Besides, I'm still a little hazy on exactly what happened."

"Let the writer worry about that."

"The writer?"

"Yeah, the writer." I pointed at her notepad. "Get your notes into a workable treatment and send it out. What about the guy who wrote *Bruce Almighty*? What's his name? He's with the agency, isn't he?" I rubbed my forehead trying to remember. "If not, somebody else. Let's flesh it out for a feature. At the very least, maybe, we get a TV movie. And remind me to get in touch with Keanu's agent. I think Keanu'd be perfect to play me. And we need a title. How about *Godproof*? Write that down. Gives a hint, but still leaves 'em wanting more."

"Are you sure you're okay?" Stacey said. "How's your head? Are you sure it's not...?" She hit me with a "you know what I mean" look.

Sure, I knew what she meant. It had crossed my mind, but I let it go.

"Never felt better," I said. "How many people can say they talked to God and got a thumbs up? How many?"

"Not many I bet."

"Life is going to be different now. You better believe it."

"Anything you say," she said as she shouldered her purse and stood.

"And remind me to find out if God has an agent," I said. "I think He's ripe for a comeback."

"Sure, I'll get right on that." Stacey stashed away her notepad. "But, how about you get some rest in the meantime. I'll call you later."

That was nice of her. At least, I knew someone cared.

As she headed for the door, she stopped and turned. "Wait, you never said what the second condition was?"

"I didn't tell you?"

"No, that's why I'm asking."

"You might want to sit down for this."

She let out her breath. "I gotta get back to the office, Buddy."

"Okay, here it is." I gave it a three second, dramatic pause and then repeated what I'd been trying to tell my nurse. "He wants me to save the world."

Chapter Two

It had been a couple of weeks since the accident. They pulled the drainage tube from my head after forty-eight hours and said my prognosis was good, but that I should take it easy for a month or so. After one week, I'd had enough of sitting around the house. You can only watch so much TV. I felt fine other than a little soreness from the ribs and a slight limp from the bruise on my thigh so I decided to head into the office.

Of the thirteen years I'd been an agent, I'd spent all of them at Zimmerman Talent. I couldn't complain. Not many get the kind of break I got at only twenty-four. It was a pretty cush job, too, with a nice expense account. Old Man Zimmerman gave me room to maneuver, to do my thing. And it also helped that I was good at my job.

But I was a man on a mission, and I couldn't waste any more time.

"Nice hair," Tommy Bahama said, plopping down into one of my chairs.

Of course, that was only a nickname. He was crowned as such because of his penchant for wearing nothing but Hawaiian shirts. His real name was Oliver Greenblatt so, for him, Tommy Bahama was most likely a blessing. He was my only friend at the agency.

"Still not used to it." I rubbed the semi-bald patch on the side of my head, now filled in with a few bristles. I'd cut the rest shorter to balance

things out.

“Gives you a Bruce Willis touch. The chicks will dig it. How’s the head?”

Oliver still said ‘chicks’ and ‘dig it’. He wasn’t married. I wasn’t either, but at least I could say divorced.

“I’m good. Better each day.”

“Good thing. The sharks were already circling from the smell of fresh blood.”

That’s one thing I didn’t like about working at ZTA. No honor amongst thieves kind of thing. If one of the agents stumbled, it didn’t take long for the others to try to add to their own client list.

“But you kept them at bay,” I said.

“Yeah. Yeah.” His attention was focused on my Enquirer headshot Stacey had conveniently left on my desk to greet me on my return. She told me I should frame it. “I still can’t believe you got front page.”

“Remember Madeline Abrams?”

“Mad Maddy?”

“Yeah, she works there now. This,” I said, picking up the tabloid, “is payback.”

“Teach you to date her daughter.”

Madeline and I had a semi-relationship going on when I met someone else at an Industry event. It was a torrid, no last names, call anytime, no strings attached deal, perfect for what each of us wanted at the time. Three weeks later, when Maddy wanted me to meet her daughter over lunch, I discovered the awful and uncomfortable truth. Let’s just say I could understand why a picture of me looking like a blowfish, fully inflated, would make the cover.

Tommy and I were sharing a chuckle over that catastrophe when I noticed the open office door and Stacey standing there.

“Oliver, Gloria’s looking for you.”

Tommy’s grin faded as he turned to me. “You teach her to knock?”

“Next story we share’ll be about Mad Gloria,” I said, patting him on the back. Gloria was his assistant, and she hated his guts. Every day, she made sure he knew it. “Good luck.”

I think mine liked me okay. Today.

As he passed by, Stacey edged toward him. “And for your information, I don’t need to knock.”

He gave her a wide berth as he exited the office, but not without a glance behind.

Before she could escape, I said. “Hey, Stace. Got a sec? I need you to send an email for me.”

Disappearing for a moment, she returned with her trusty notepad. She sat and turned to an empty page. “If you hang around people like that, you’ll never become a better person.”

“Thanks, Mom.”

“If you’re serious about your promise to you know who.” She jabbed a finger at the ceiling.

“Done with the sermon? Can we start?”

A frown hinted at her lips. “Yeah, I’m ready.”

“God needs an agent. Do you remember me telling you that?”

“Yeah, but wasn’t that the drugs talking? You were acting crazy at the time.”

“Crazy like a fox,” I said.

“I was thinking crazy like a lunatic. Saving the world and all? Have you told anyone else? If you tell Oliver, everyone’ll eventually know.”

“You’re the only one so far.”

A small smile showed. “I held off sending out those notes you wrote up while you were in the hospital,” she said.

“That’s fine. That’s fine. There’s something more important I need to do which is why—”

“Let’s not repeat the premise.” She readied her pen. “You were saying that God needs an agent.”

“I don’t literally mean God needs an agent. I mean he needs someone on the ground to fix things. An ambassador of sorts.”

“Didn’t he already do something like that?”

“That was a long time ago. Now is now. I’m telling you, religion could use a makeover. Like if someone claims they’re the Son of God these days, they’d be crucified, right?”

“I don’t think we do that anymore.”

I checked to see if she was serious. She was. “Not *crucified* crucified. I mean crucified in the media.”

She bit her lip and then perked up. “I remember reading in *People Magazine* about this guy in Miami who claimed he was the Son of God. They didn’t write anything mean about him though.”

“How did he come across?”

“Weird, I guess,” she said. “I mean he’s not really Jesus.”

“Exactly! That’s how God would seem if He ever reappeared.”

“Well, it doesn’t hurt to believe in something.”

She wanted to draw me off topic. Last year, when I was thinking about repping this family from Utah, some kind of Mormon ‘Father Knows Best’ reality show, she wanted to become a Mormon. The year before, it was Avon. I didn’t offer any help then, and it sounded like she wanted to revisit the issue.

No, she’d have to find solid ground on her own. I had more important things to deal with.

“Remember how I made a promise to God?” I said.

“My friend Jessica saw an angel once.”

“Just listen. Last night, I couldn’t sleep so I was channel-hopping when I stopped on one of those religious shows where this preacher—”

“She said it was an angel, but from the way she described it, I think it was a big bird or maybe a really fat pigeon.”

“Let me cut to the chase. As I watched his show, I had an epiphany.”

“What’s an epiphany?”

“Think of it like a light bulb going off. All of a sudden, you understand.”

“Oh, I guess I just had an epiphany, too.”

“Right.” *You gotta love her.* “...but you need to stop talking and listen.” I waited to make sure we were in agreement; apparently we were, so I continued. “Something appeared on the screen on Channel 562. It was something God had told me to look for.”

“Oh! Like a sign?” she said.

“Exactly.”

“I hope I get a sign soon we’re going to start.” She held up her pen. “I’ve got scripts to read.”

I took a deep breath. As much as I tried to keep her on topic, she had a knack for pulling me off as well. Maybe I should invest in a Dictaphone.

“Address this letter to the Right Reverend Oral Heddins, care of the Breathe Life unto Life Church of the Apostle, Waxahachie, Texas.”

Chapter Three

I flew into DFW the following Wednesday and picked up my rental car for the drive down to Waxahachie, a little town about thirty miles south of Dallas. I followed I-35 until I hit 287 and turned east. I didn't have exact directions. They didn't have any cars with GPS, and some rookie behind the desk couldn't find the maps, so I decided once I got close, I'd ask. Turned out, that wasn't necessary. After taking the Waxahachie Exit and driving a few miles, I had to lower my visor to ward off the sunlight reflecting from my intended destination, the Beloved Holy Temple of the Apostle.

An article I read about the Temple said the spires rose hundreds of feet into the air, all eight of them. The building itself was a reinforced concrete behemoth, wrapped with a mirror-like exterior that, from some accounts, on a sunny day, could quick-broil a misguided bird from three yards away. It stood in the middle of two hundred acres of prime governmental boondoggle where construction had begun on a giant Superconducting Super Collider. Five years ago, the Right Reverend Oral Hedgins had bought the hole and the surrounding real estate for pennies on the dollar and established the home for his church and a site for his magnificent Temple.

Following large, colorful signs on a narrow county road, I found the entrance to the complex, a group of low-lying buildings surrounded by a

large chain-link fence. A lone guard approached as I pulled up to the gate. When I lowered my window, the outside heat invaded.

“Name,” the guard said.

“Buddy. Buddy Price.” Given his employer, I expected a much more cordial greeting, but Ernest, as his name tag indicated, was all business. “With Zimmerman Talent Agency.”

He scanned a list attached to his clipboard. “Who are you here to see?”

“Reverend Hedgins.”

“I’ll need some identification.”

I removed my license and handed it over. He examined it, then me, and after apparently struggling with the lessened resemblance (due to the hair thing), secured it to his clipboard.

“Stay here,” he said.

He disappeared inside his guardhouse where he made a call. I understood the need for security. You never know what kooks are out there.

Soon enough, he returned and handed me my license as well as a visitor’s badge. “Be sure to have this visible at all times.”

Without even a parting nod, he raised the gate and allowed me in.

The grounds included a number of warehouses laid out like the back lot of Universal Studios. No doubt the original plan had them dedicated to serious scientific work, but from what I could see, that had changed. One warehouse’s open doors revealed a more pedestrian function – storage for props. Inside, I caught sight of an over-sized Jesus proclaiming the Dallas Cowboys Number One.

After only one wrong turn, I reached the main building. Adjacent to it was the Heavenly Production Studios, as the large black lettering above the entrance proclaimed. Hedgins had quite the facilities there, state of the art stuff. At least, that’s what I’d read.

Outside the perimeter of the fence, maybe a quarter of a mile away, the Beloved Holy Temple of the Apostle reached toward the heavens. I shielded my eyes from the glare, but could still make out a stretch of lawn in front that surrounded a large rectangular pool. Walt Disney would have been proud.

I parked close but still broke a sweat before getting inside. There, the Texas-sized heat gave way to a subdued cool, but the attractive blond receptionist kicked it up a few degrees again.

“Buddy Price to see Reverend Hedgins,” I said.

“Did you have any trouble finding us?” she said, running a finger down a list of names.

“No, I saw the light.”

“Yes, it’s drawn many new members to our place of worship.”

Maybe she caught the reference but chose to ignore my attempted humor. I tried a little more of the old Buddy Price charm. “It’d be great to have that window washing contract, huh?”

Her expression didn’t change. “I’ll notify Reverend Hedgins about your arrival. You can sit over there.” She motioned toward a waiting area.

Take rejection without dejection, I thought as I walked away. I guess you could call it my philosophy of life. You pretty much have to have that kind of attitude in the business I’m in.

The people of the Beloved Temple had spared no expense in constructing their own little Eden right in this building. The ceiling ascended several stories above, with a glass dome revealing the bright blue sky; against one wall, a terraced landscape of lush greenery. A waterfall added a melodic refrain as it cascaded over rocks into a shallow pool. Unseen birds chirped. I might have converted then and there, but I caught sight of speakers hidden behind bushes. That killed the illusion for me, although, I have to admit, a masterful bit of manipulation.

After ten minutes, a side door opened and a stacked brunette entered the room. Her heels clicked on the white tile floor, the sound echoing across the expansive room.

“I’m Rebecca, Reverend Hedgins’ assistant. If you’ll follow me.”

Her manner reminded me a lot of the receptionist’s so I kept my charm in my pants.

A quick ride on a private elevator brought us to another reception area, this one less overwhelming – I heard no birds – but nonetheless still inspirational with paintings of religious figures gracing the walls and organ music playing lightly in the background.

Rebecca escorted me to washed oak double doors at the end of the room. “He’s waiting for you inside.”

Hedgins’ office featured deep burgundy carpet with plain white walls, a cross-inspired border and topped off with a gilded ceiling. He was not at his desk which rested on an elevated platform, much like an altar. Behind, a picture window offered a view of the Beloved Temple in all its splendor.

Hedgins' desktop was bare except for a telephone and a laptop.

Behind his desk, there it was – the Box – the main reason for my journey to Waxahachie.

I approached slowly as if some hidden trap might spring and catch my advance. Small and compact, maybe four inches by six, the Box appeared to be constructed of lead with worn edges and a rounded top, its surface covered with small pits attesting to its age. The lid contained a sequence of raised numbers, each held in its own little square, ranging from zero to nine. A swirl deco border surrounded the numbers with a flower emanating from the top of the design, a bee hovering above. It was enclosed in a clear, Plexiglas-type container, bulletproof I guessed, set on top of a marble pedestal. A small, flashing red light blinked from a keypad.

A toilet flushed to my right and I took a step back as Reverend Hedgins exited from a hidden doorway in the wall. He wiped his hands with a small hand towel, which he tossed inside before the door closed and blended in.

I squinted against his dazzling grin.

“Mr. Price, I see you made it. Welcome. Welcome.” He walked toward me, a slight hitch in his step.

He wore his signature white suit which contrasted with a dark tan, making him look a bit like a photographic negative. I guessed maybe late sixties, but his energy made him seem a man half his age. His voice was strong, as it was on his television show, *The Waiting for God Hour*, but in person, even more impressive. He had me by a few inches.

He took my hand in his and enveloped it with his other. They were still a little damp. “I hope you had no problems finding us.”

As if the reflective power of a thousand suns searing your retinas wasn’t enough.

“Like I told the receptionist, your church is hard to miss.”

“Marketing, my son.” He tapped the side of his head with his forefinger. “All in the marketing, but I suppose you know a thing or two about promotion, don’t you?”

“I wouldn’t be here if I didn’t, Reverend.”

“I’m always eager to hear from someone interested in spreading the word.” He looked down at the box. “So you’ve been checking out our little miracle I see. Have a seat and let’s talk.”

Hedgins waited as I found a chair. He then turned his back to me, punched in a code which extinguished the red light. He flipped open the glass cover and retrieved the box. “Have you done your homework?”

"I have, but found mostly rumors about your exodus a few years ago." I paused, not sure if I should finish, but I did. It's why I was here. "And also about what you found."

He sat at his desk. "How about I give you the real story? Truth is always better than fiction."

I nodded although I bet Oliver Stone would likely disagree with that assessment.

Hedgins laid the Box on his desk. "A few years ago, I left the church in search of answers. I journeyed around the world, my travels taking me to places where I lived off the kindness of strangers. I kept hoping one day, somewhere I would find what I was looking for. When my spirit was at its lowest, God must have seen I was ready and sent me an angel. She ran a small, non-descript shop in London selling jewelry boxes. Everyone on the street passed by the shop, but God led me inside.

"She talked with me, and before I knew it, I was purging myself of my transgressions and telling her about my long, arduous search for the Truth. She laid her hand upon mine and told me she had a special curio. Inside it, I would find my answers."

He frowned and pushed at the numbered buttons on the box's lid.

"You haven't opened it." I said after giving him a good minute.

His tan deepened. "No, but the Lord wants us to follow the righteous path which sometimes requires patience." He stood and returned the Box to its position on the pedestal. "Lots of people in my business would like to get their hands on this. They recognize the power it holds within. Our donations went up three percent last quarter." He lowered the glass lid and reactivated the security system.

I wondered if God had told anyone else of His plans. He *had* told me. He said He wanted to end the world, more or less. Of course, I'm paraphrasing, but it was something like, "If you people don't get your shit together, the slate will be wiped clean." He told me to look for a sign. It would be a box and when I found it, I would know what to do. This box had to be that sign.

I'd seen it on late night television, on Hedgin's show. Sure, I still didn't know exactly what I needed to do, but I decided to wing it until that part of the divine message came through.

Hedgins returned to his desk and pulled his laptop over. "Do you tweet?" he said as he typed.

“No, I value my time too much.”

“You should try it. It’s wonderful.”

I had tried it, following a few of my clients at first, but soon grew tired of comments like ‘Just ate the best cheeseburger ever at...<insert name of burger joint>’, which netted them a few hundred dollars each time. “I’ll leave that to the celebrities,” I said.

“I find it glorious. I can spread God’s word one hundred forty characters at a time.” He typed for a few more seconds, closed the laptop lid and focused on me. “Okay, enough of that, Mr. Price. Your turn. Dazzle me.”

I planned on doing just that.

“Reverend, as I told you in my letter, the most important thing is to know what your audience’s needs are. That’s true whether it’s creating a hit comedy or a sermon for next Sunday. If it’s a comedy, they need to laugh. If it’s a sermon, they need to find comfort and meaning in the words. But we need something in return, don’t we? Let’s be honest. We don’t do this for free. I’m guessing you have a large overhead?”

He frowned. “So far, I’m not impressed.”

“You and I know the way to be successful is to put people in the seats.”

He chuckled a bit like a parent tolerating a naive child. “Success comes in many forms.”

“But if not for your congregation here in Waxahachie, your message wouldn’t be heard at all.”

“You haven’t done your homework very well after all. I do have a television show.”

“I know. It’s why I’m here.” I rose from the chair. I do my best work on my feet. “Last week, I couldn’t sleep. At three in the morning, I’m flipping through channels when I came across *The Waiting for God Hour*. You pulled me in immediately. And that’s great, but, the problem was I just happened to find you. We need to make more people aware that you exist and then keep them. Yes, I did do my homework. Last month, your reach was down five percent. Ten percent from the prior year. Reverend, you’re not headed in the right direction. You got lucky when I found you, but you can’t build a following, the kind of following you need, based on luck alone.”

“It’s not luck, Mr. Price. It was God’s will.”

I pointed over his shoulder at the box. “Imagine how big a church you would need to build for all the people who would want to know its secret.”

“The church is not limited by physical walls. We help thousands and thousands of people around the world.”

“Right, then why not tens of thousands? Why not millions? The world is a messed up place, and we need to reach a lot of people.” From Hedgins’ expression, I could see that maybe I was getting somewhere.

“All fine and good, but what you propose costs money. Lots of it,” he said.

“No, Reverend. All we have to do is reinvent you.”

He crossed his arms. “Don’t you mean fix me?”

“Not too long ago, you were considered the golden boy of gospel, but then you ran into a little problem.”

“Where are you going with this?”

“According to you, the world should have ended. What was it, three years ago? January twenty-first? That didn’t happen so much. You tried again, next going for May sixteenth, but again, no dice. You took a beating in the media. Remember that *Time* magazine cover story?”

“Bunch of cowards, waiting until afterward to judge me. What could they have done if I’d been right?”

“And then came the *60 Minutes* exposé on your church.” In that interview, Hedgins maintained that God had changed his mind and would let him know.

“My enemies surround me.”

“Exactly! Lesser men would have been defeated, but you survived. You rebuilt your following.”

“He...” Hedgins glanced toward the ceiling, “gives me inspiration to persevere over all obstacles.” He returned his gaze. “And with that in mind, unless you have a point to make.”

“My promise to you is to boost your ratings, improve your show and make it the biggest and best out there.”

“A gentleman came in last year saying the same thing. And here we are, still stuck in the ratings behind *Father Bob’s Kneeling for Grace*.” He punched the intercom. “Rebecca?”

“There’s a reason you were given the box,” I said.

“Tell me something I don’t already know.”

Rebecca answered. “Yes, Reverend Hedgins?”

“I’m going to use that box to fulfill your destiny,” I said. “We promote the hell out of it and the secret it holds inside. Sure, we may need to spend a

little, but, in the end, you get it back plus a lot more. Think of who you can help with that kind of money.”

Hedgins’ hand hovered over the phone.

“You know what I say. Go big or go home.” One last chance and I gave him all I had. “When I open that box, your show will save the world.”

He stared at me with his cool green eyes. “Never mind, Rebecca.” Hedgins punched the intercom off, leaned back and crossed his arms. “So, Mr. Price, tell me more.”

I did have one more important thing to say.

“Reverend,” I said. “You aren’t the only one who has talked to God.”

Chapter Four

They put me in an extended-stay corporate apartment. In Waxahachie, that translated to a furnished studio with a Murphy bed, some Corelle dishes and a next door neighbor who liked to play his bass at two in the morning. I would've preferred the Marriott in Dallas and dealt with the thirty mile commute. That's child's play for an Angelino like me, but Oral insisted I get situated nearby in case he or anyone else needed me after hours while I retooled his show.

My idea of spotlighting the box meant big changes, and he needed his top personnel to be briefed. The first week, Oral called a meeting in his office to introduce me to the Advisory Board – Frances Manor, his CFO, James Shockley, VP of Operations, Bill Blanchard, VP of Production at Heavenly Studios and two satellite ministers who looked down on us from a pair of big screen TVs. I quickly learned that the advisory function of the Board was mostly limited to nodding their heads and periodically proclaiming 'Amen'. That was okay by me since I wasn't looking for much advice.

Oral introduced my idea to them but not in the way I expected.

"Everyone, I have glorious news," he proclaimed. "God has sent an angel who will show us the way."

I once dressed as the Pope for Jimmy Cameron's annual Halloween

party. That's as close as I'd ever come to celestial status.

"I knew the day would come when God would provide us a way to extend his message to those who languish outside his embrace. If we held strong to our convictions, if we trusted our hearts, if we proved our faith, He would respond. And now, because of this..." Hedgins balled his fist and shook it like an old codger threatening those no-good kids to get off his lawn, "I've been handed a wonderful gift. Soon I will be able to reveal what is inside." He waved his hand toward the box.

In unison, the wall-mounted ministers said, "Praise God."

Oral nodded. "Yes, our prayers have been answered."

"Amen!"

His eyes prowled the room with growing enthusiasm. "As I have warned, the Earth will experience a terrible conflagration. Its surface will be cleansed of all heathen, pagans and unbelievers. It is my duty to warn everyone of this inevitable day, a day which is fast approaching."

Since our initial conversation, he'd been seemingly reassured by the fact that I'd also talked to God, and that my conversation with the Almighty had paralleled his own. Maybe, to Hedgins, it was confirmation that he wasn't crazy after all so he was going all in with me. Personally, I still reserved judgment – about both of us.

"To help in this holiest of missions, a man has come from a place far away," Hedgins said, now waving his hand in my direction.

I guess he means Hollywood.

"His name is Buddy Price, and I want everyone to welcome him with open arms because it is *he* who will guide us over the airwaves to spread the word of the End of Days. And, praise be, Mr. Price will also be my new co-host on *The Waiting for God Hour*."

Frances Manor, a thin, straight-laced church lady type and the aforementioned CFO of Breathe Life unto Life, eyed me as I stood. She didn't seem as thrilled as the others.

The co-host thing was something I'd pitched Hedgins the first day of the redevelopment process. I suggested that maybe he needed someone who could act like a conductor, a layperson to whom newbies to the 'getting religion' thing could relate, and, more importantly, someone who he could use to deflect potential criticism. I promised him I'd take the heat if things went sideways. Maybe he liked that the most.

For my part, I wanted an opportunity to point things in the right

direction. If, and hopefully when, I figured out how to open that box, this show would be a springboard to fulfilling my promise to God, and I needed to be front and center when that happened.

I introduced myself to the Board, gave them a little of my bio, mentioned that I looked forward to an open, working relationship with each at the table and stressed my confidence that I could expand the reach of Reverend Hedgins' show.

After all that, I hit them with my big finish. "The four words I live by," I said, "are Plan, Produce, Promote..." I noticed that Oral paid no attention to any of this, his fingers flying over the screen of an iPhone. "...and Promise. I promise to plan carefully, produce a show you'll be proud of, and promote it until millions are watching." I used this four word mantra to close a deal for a commercial with Pillsbury (except today I swapped out their name with Promise) and thought it fit here as well. "Eventually, everyone will know of the Reverend's message," I said, thanked everyone and sat.

The truth was Oral had caught me off guard. I hadn't expected his pronouncement to the Board that the box would be opened. That's not something we'd agreed to. I'd hoped to hold that off for a few more weeks, or months, as the case may be. True, I had intimated I could accomplish something along those lines, but had he not heard of hyperbole? You know, like he's as big as a house or her brain's the size of a pea. Or, like in my case, I can open your box. But Oral took me at my word, and, as far as these five were concerned, we were locked in for a grand opening for that box.

So maybe five people I could manage.

I cleared my throat to cue him.

Oral glanced up as he pocketed his phone. "I have tweeted the glorious news to our brethren." He hit me with a blazing smile. "The celebration will soon begin."

Okay, more than five, now. I'd been outed.

* * *

As Executive Producer of *WGH*, I concentrated on implementing the new changes in the format. Rehearsals and production meetings filled each day, hardly a moment when I wasn't doing something. We had two weeks

before the box would have its premier and the buzz was building. And not just in Central Texas. Word had definitely gotten out. ABC, CBS, NBC, FOX, CNN, you name a few letters and they were banging on our door, wanting to know what we were up to with the Jeremiah Box.

Yeah, the name was one of our major changes. Oral came up with that.

"Jeremiah was a prophet," he had said, "fated always to tell the truth but never to be believed."

Everyone said Amen, and so with that special blessing, the box had a new appellation.

I didn't mind. It was catchy, something the media could latch onto. Something they could use to spread the word. Unfortunately for me, the more attention the box received, the more pressure I got from home.

My cell rang on my drive over to the Temple. It was Stacey.

"Talk to me," I said.

"Your ice-maker doesn't work."

I let her stay at my place in Santa Monica while I was gone. Since I anticipated being out of town for several months, I didn't want it to sit empty. My condo was a few blocks from the beach. Compared to Stacey's apartment in Koreatown, it would be like heaven. I should know. I'd been there.

"I told you that already. Didn't you read my note?"

"Yeah, you got a ton of notes here. Did you expect me to read them all?"

Ton of notes. See, that's hyperbole. "No, I wrote them to—"

"And, my God, your upstairs neighbor like wears cement boots."

Stacey might not know what an epiphany is, but she sure knew her way around hyperbole. "She's big. I think it's a thyroid thing. You oughta say hi."

"Maybe you could call."

"Not on great terms with her myself since my last party. Did you call just to complain?" I asked.

"No, it's about Mr. Z. He's grumbling."

"What's new?" Mr. Zimmerman had two settings, silent and grumble, but he was harmless if you stayed on his good side.

"Are you sure about this show of yours? I mean I never saw the connection. You and religion? Maybe you should come home."

"Life is full of surprises, Stace."

“Yeah, well, uh, don’t be surprised if you have no job when you return.”

“Don’t worry about it.”

“I’m serious. People are starting to talk. They say you’ve gone off the deep end. And those are your friends. You should hear what the others are saying.”

“Look, put the Old Man off until next week. Make something up and I’ll fly in for a few days to smooth things over. What d’ya say? Can you do that?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “I’m worried, you know, nobody’s hiring right now.”

“I’ll take care of it and you. Everything’s going to be fine.” I gave her a chance to respond. Nothing. “Okay, I’ll call you tomorrow.” I ended the call as I arrived at the front gate.

Security Guard Ernest, adept in the art of recognition, let me through with a wave. I parked and trudged inside, trying to ignore the heat already at ninety-five degrees according to my car’s dashboard thermometer.

I also tried to ignore Stacey’s not so subtle warning to me. Things weren’t going well at the office. I’d amassed a lot of unused vacation time over the years, but apparently, a lack of commissionable sales didn’t sit well with the boss. I entered the building and waved at the receptionist who smiled and waved back. Sure, I wanted to act like things were under control, but, deep down, that little voice of reason which intruded sometimes in my life was screaming pretty damned loud. As I waited for the elevator to arrive, I stuffed a figurative sock in its mouth. I had a busy day today and didn’t need any distractions.

Before hitting my office, I sidetracked to the kitchen on the second floor where I grabbed my morning cup of coffee. I had checked my email this morning and found one from CFO Manor indicating that she needed to talk when I arrived. From the kitchen, her office was only a short walk to the other end of the hall.

“Good morning, Mr. Price,” her secretary said, bubbling over with genuine enthusiasm.

“Morning. Is she available?” I didn’t remember the secretary’s name or even if I had been introduced, but almost everyone at corporate seemed to know me. I was becoming quite the celebrity.

“Miss Manor is waiting for you. You can go right in.”

I approached the meeting as I would ripping off a Band-Aid. I knew she

didn't like me. The only question was how much. "Wanted to see me?" I forced a fake smile as I entered, hoping that it might help soften the unpleasanties.

She raised a bony finger while she dealt with a phone call. "Yes. We'll do that. Yes. I understand. Please let me know." She replaced the phone on its base.

I didn't think lips could trace a line as tight as what she showed me – almost as constricted as the hair strangling in the bun on top of her head.

"Close the door behind you," she said.

I did but remained near the entrance. A trio of Banker Boxes lined the console behind her desk.

"Moving?"

"In a manner of speaking." She stabbed at the intercom. "Sarah, hold all my calls, please."

Ah, Sarah, that's it.

"Yes, Miss Manor," Sarah's voice responded through the speaker.

Miss Manor clasped her hands together in front of her on the desktop. "Take a seat." She nodded at a nearby chair and waited until I sat. Then she did something unexpected. She smiled, or attempted something approximating one. "Have you talked with Oral today?"

"No, I came right over to see you. Why?"

"Just curious." She eyed the stapler, lifted the slide to check its load, and shut it. She spun around in her chair and placed it in the nearest box. Turning back, she continued. "Did you happen to attend services last night?"

"I've been pretty busy."

"You should have. It was a lovely sermon." She took a breath. "And how are things going with the changes to our show?"

She said this in a sing-song voice which I doubt she had ever used in her entire professional life.

"Fine," I said, but maybe I was asking as much as answering.

"And your place? I hear there's a delightful pool for you to use."

"There always seems to be plenty of sun," I replied, wondering when we'd the real topic of conversation.

"Well." She propped her hands as if she were about to pray.

"Well?"

"How do I begin?"

“What is it we’re talking about?” I smiled, all *innocence and peppermint*, as my ex-wife liked to misquote that old Strawberry Alarm Clock song.

“The thing.” Her eyes darted off and quickly returned.

“What thing?”

“The thing.” She emphasized the two words, each distinct and distasteful. The pale pink in her cheeks rose to a bright fuchsia.

Oh, shit. Now I knew what this was all about.

Last week in the late afternoon, I was working with the stage manager and the assistant director on shot sheets when the video mixer blew. I’d hoped to have a run-through the next morning, but without the mixer, we weren’t going to get much accomplished. I jumped on the phone to Hedgins’ office to see what options we had. Rebecca must have already left because Oral answered. He sounded in good spirits and remained so after I told him a replacement would likely cost over ten thousand dollars.

“Come up to my office, I’ll be here. I can write you a check,” he said.

I didn’t make it out of the studio for at least a couple more hours, struggling with the new *WGH Choral Quartet* who had arrived late for their practice. No one could remember their cues no matter how many times we went over it. I called it a night, told everyone to get some sleep and we’d start again tomorrow. On the way out to my car, I remembered about the mixer. If Oral were still around, I could grab the check and head into Dallas first thing and take care of it myself.

I ran up to his office, hoping he’d still be there. From the dimly lit anteroom, a light glowed underneath the oak doors, so I entered without a second thought.

It’s common knowledge that in times of acute emotional stress, the brain can repress certain memories. With the trauma of an event coupled with the dump of hormones from the body, your neurons never sync and the memory never gets saved to the old hard drive.

In my case, none of that happened.

I remembered everything.

On top of Hedgins’ glass desktop, skinny, white legs belonging to CFO Manor wishboned like a ‘V’ for victory (or vagina, I suppose) toward the ceiling while Reverend Hedgins, with pants around the ankles, pounded away at her lady bits. Hedgins didn’t see me, his backside conveniently pointed in my direction, and, if their position had been reversed, he still wouldn’t have noticed since his head was kicked up as if looking for an

ataboy from on high. CFO Manor let loose with a couple of ‘Thank you, Jesuses’ before she caught sight of me standing in the office doorway.

I froze like a deer in the proverbial headlights except those high beams were bouncing up and down with each whammo provided by the eager preacher. Our eyes locked and her mouth worked like a landed fish, no doubt wanting to warn Hedgins of the intrusion, yet apparently unable to multitask in her current state of arousal. She closed her eyes, which was enough to break the spell for me. I backed out as fast as my size eleven Gucci loafers could take me.

We hadn’t crossed paths or spoken since.

“Look, Frances. Can I call you Frances?” Given our shared experience, I didn’t see why not.

“Miss Manor will still do,” she answered, her grimace-smile briefly making a reappearance.

“You can relax, Miss Manor. I haven’t told anyone.”

“Well, I would hope not,” she responded in full umbrage, her back rigid as a washboard.

“I know everyone has their little secrets.” I nodded, smiling. “This will be ours.”

“I don’t know what you think you saw...” somehow the washboard got more rigid, “...but I suggest you think again.”

There was no confusion about what I witnessed on the altar of Reverend Hedgins’ desk that night. I’ve been to my fair share of strip joints and her leg spread was one of the more popular forms of expression on the pole. Hard to mistake that.

She leaned in. “I wanted to speak with you today so you could see my position.”

I already have, my dear, and it was quite remarkable. Maybe a smirk escaped because her fuchsia cheeks spiked to a torrid crimson.

“I’m a good person, Mr. Price. I attend church every Sunday. I tithe my ten percent. I donate my time to help the poor and downtrodden. I will not allow my reputation to be tarnished.”

“Frances, please. It’s only us here. You can stop the act.” Maybe I shouldn’t have said it, but I couldn’t help myself. She was sitting in the moral nose-bleed section, and I wanted to bring her a little closer to Mother Earth.

“Well, I never.”

I smiled and winked in reply.

She stiffened again, her eyes wild and fiery, and then just as quickly, she wilted. Tears glistened, ready to roll. "I—I—I thought he liked me." A single drop crawled down her cheek. "But he was using me." She gulped and fanned her face with a tremulous hand. "Oh my God. Oh my God. I think I'm going to be sick." She turned to the side and bent over, hugging her arms around her waist.

I spotted a trash can by the side of the desk and stretched out my foot to nudge it a few inches closer. "You okay there?"

Part of me wanted to sprint for the door, but instead I drew closer, placing a hand on her shoulder.

She sprang up and wrapped her arms around my neck. "A few days ago, I caught him with Rebecca."

"There. There." I patted her on the back. What else could I do?

"Why did I allow myself to be drawn into his den of iniquity?" She pushed her face into the nape of my neck. "He was so handsome. You can't imagine how lonely I was. When he offered to meet me late in his office, I never imagined what would happen."

She proceeded to drown me in her confessional, the details of which I tried my best to ignore. After a few minutes, I sensed an opening as her rambling slowed.

"He's a bastard," I said. "You just need to put it all behind you."

She sniffed. "I'm not a very good person either."

"Come on." Pat. Pat. "I'm sure you have some wonderful qualities."

"No. No." She exposed some serious Alice Cooper eyes. "You don't understand. I've done a very bad thing."

A strand of hair escaped its bun prison and waved semi-seductively over one eye. I felt a brief pang of empathy for this woman.

Hopefully, it was only empathy.

"You're not a bad person. Look, you're both consenting adults, and everyone has needs. It's a natural thing to want to..." I didn't like where I was headed. "Give it a few weeks, you'll get over it. We all do."

"No, that's not what I'm talking about. I've done something else. Something very, very bad." Her voice sounded deeper now, more remorseful than embarrassed.

I searched her eyes. "What exactly have you done?"

The phone rang. She hesitated and broke her grip on my neck to answer.

"I thought I told you to hold all – okay, give me a second and put him through." She turned to me. "I think we're done here."

"That's it?" She had flipped it off like a light switch. "No, you need to tell me what's going on."

"You'll find out soon enough." The phone beeped with the incoming call. "Now, if you'll please. I need to take this."

Sure, time to go. I'd find out from Hedgins himself.

But a thought nagged at me as I made my way to the door. I turned for one last question. "Frances, you didn't kill him, did you?"

Website: www.buddyprice-agent.com
Email: buddy@buddyprice-agent.com
Twitter: [@AgentBuddyPrice](https://twitter.com/@AgentBuddyPrice)

You can also learn more about the author, William Darrah Whitaker, or contact him at:

Website: www.wdarrahwhitaker.com
Email: darrah@wdarrahwhitaker.com
Facebook: www.facebook.com/wdarrahwhitaker
Twitter: [@WDarrahWhitaker.](https://twitter.com/@WDarrahWhitaker)

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“Talent can take you places, but it’s
who you know that keeps you there.”

- Buddy Price