

Eric Rill

**PINNACLE OF
DECEIT**



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A NOVEL

ERIC RILL

AVANTE PRESS

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Second edition published by Avante Press 2014

Cover and Interior Design by Damonza

Library of Congress Control Number: 2013958246

ISBN 978-0-9910144-1-5

www.ericrill.com

PROLOGUE

Phoenix, Arizona

“YOUR MOTHER’S A slut,” Vince taunted, “nothin’ but a cheap whore.”

“You son of a bitch,” Anthony yelled. He charged Vince and forced him to the ground, pummeling him with his fists. Then he picked up a rock that was lying nearby and brought it down savagely against his skull. Vince Scargill went quiet.

Harmon Baker pried Anthony off the motionless body. “Jesus Christ! What did you do?” Harmon shouted.

“He deserved what he got,” Anthony Marshall said in a flat voice.

“Deserved to die?” Harmon asked plaintively.

“Cut the shit. Both of you,” Ricardo Sánchez ordered. “We need to figure out what we’re going to tell the cops.” He pulled a knife from his back pocket, concealing it behind his large frame. Nodding in Anthony’s direction, he beckoned, “Amigo, come here.” As Anthony came into range, Ricardo flicked open the switchblade and rammed it into Anthony’s forearm. It shot through an artery, spurting blood over both of them.

Anthony dropped to the ground with a look of disbelief. “I can’t move my hand,” he screamed.

“Maybe you’d rather rot in some stinking rathole of a jail,” Ricardo said, wiping the blood off his face with the sleeve of his black T-shirt.

“For chrissakes—this is crazy! Leave him alone!” Harmon pleaded.

“Hammy, you shut up, or I’ll cut you, too,” Ricardo shot

back, as he took off his belt and fashioned a tourniquet around Anthony's forearm in an effort to stop the gushing blood.

Gerald Pratt, the only other witness, stood transfixed near the corpse, shaking uncontrollably, his white trousers stained with urine.

"Pratt, take the knife and put it in Vince's hand," Ricardo directed. "And use that snot-filled handkerchief of yours to wipe it down first. I don't want you leaving your prints on it."

"I can't do that," Gerald stammered, tears streaming down his cheeks. "Oh my God! I think Tony killed him. We're all going to fry!"

"Look, you pussy. Do it, or I'll cut off your *cojones!*" Ricardo ordered. "When the cops get here we all have to have the same story—Vince threatened Anthony, pulled a knife, and attacked him. He had to defend himself, so he bashed him with a rock. It was self-defense. Got it? An accident. An unfortunate accident."

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The lights of police cars ricocheted off the sunlit windowpanes of the dreary stone building. Neighbors pushed their faces against the wire fence and watched in disbelief as Vince Scargill's blood-caked skull disappeared into a black body bag. Despite the blistering summer Phoenix heat, the boys sat shivering on the ground by the side door of St. Joseph's orphanage, being ministered to by police, doctors, and school personnel.

Father Riley, perspiration forming around his receding hairline, leaned against the ambulance, talking to Hank Thompson, the detective in charge of the crime scene. "Yes, sir. I believe the boys are telling the truth. I'm sure Vincent started it. He was always a real troublemaker. I figured he'd either kill someone or end up like this one day."

"No extended family?" the detective asked, fanning himself with his clipboard.

"No, sir. None that I know of."

"How long have the others been here?"

"Ricardo's mother brought him in about seven years ago. She said she couldn't afford to take care of him anymore,"

Father Riley replied. "She left him on the front stoop and headed back to Mexico with her boyfriend." The priest used his stubby finger to point at the boys. "That short, fair-haired one is Anthony Marshall. He's been here since he was an infant. His mother's a prostitute down on Thomas Road. She didn't want him to grow up in her world. She was a Catholic, so we took the boy in. Ricardo and Anthony are both smart kids, but they always seem to be on the wrong side of the line—always in trouble."

"And the other two?" Thompson asked, gesturing in the direction of the huddled youths.

"Gerald came here six years ago, when he was eight," Father Riley said, adjusting his damp collar. "His parents died in a horrible car crash. He's withdrawn, distant, and hard to reach. He follows Anthony around like a puppy dog all the time, but he's not a bad kid, really."

"And the tall, dark one?" Thompson asked.

"That's Harmon Baker. His is probably the saddest story of all. The family lived in a remote area up near Wickenburg. Their cabin caught fire, and his father sent him to get help. While he was gone the propane tank went, and the place blew up, killing them all, including his three sisters. The poor child blames himself. It's a pity. He's the best-liked youngster here—and the least trouble."

"We'll have to interview them down at the station. But on the face of it, it looks like Anthony was trying to defend himself," Detective Thompson said, mopping the sweat off his face with his soiled handkerchief.

"So they won't be charged with anything, Detective?" Father Riley asked.

"Not from what I can see here, but my gut tells me these kids are really screwed. Can't imagine any of them having a normal life after this."

1

HARMON BAKER RACED up the stairs of the Rayburn Building to his suite of offices on the fourth floor. They were large and elegantly furnished in keeping with his status as an eight-term representative and chairman of the powerful House Banking and Finance Committee of the Congress of the United States.

Sally Burton, his administrative assistant, met him in the waiting room. "Good morning, Congressman," she said, giving him the once-over. "I like your suit. Looks better than that brown one you wore yesterday."

Baker, a light-skinned black man with steely gray hair, undid the buttons on his jacket and flashed an easy smile. "Glad you approve."

"But I'd ditch the monogram," Sally said, pointing to the ornate letters sewn on his blue Sea Island cotton shirt. "Everybody knows your initials."

"Very funny, Sally," Baker said, his smile waning. "What's on the agenda?"

"At nine-thirty you have a contingent from Tucson coming by to have their picture taken with you and pick up VIP passes for the White House tour. I've scheduled Bob Kaplan, the cotton industry lobbyist, at ten—but I've only given him a half-hour. Your Foreign Affairs Committee is at ten-thirty. And I'd suggest that for once you show up on time."

"Sally, first of all, I'm always on time—except for that fiasco two weeks ago. Secondly, I don't have to answer to you on this or any other issue," Baker scolded.

"Then you have lunch with Senator Gales, followed by

fifteen minutes with Boy Scout Troop 163 from Phoenix,” Sally continued, not bothering to look up from her notebook. “After that you’re free to enjoy your squash game with Congressman Farrell. And don’t forget your speech at the Mexican Embassy at six. Oh, I almost forgot. Your eight o’clock is here. I put him in your office.”

Baker brushed by her. “Hold my calls; I don’t want to be disturbed,” he said, closing the door behind him. The walls of his private office were covered with the usual signed photographs of political figures and celebrities with their autographed best wishes, but most striking was a collection of oil paintings by the black nineteenth-century primitive artist, John Pickney, and some faded ledger book drawings by American Indians. An enlarged and elegantly framed photo of Baker with four Latino mayors taken at the dedication of a new Hispanic cultural center sat on a table in front of the Arizona state flag.

An olive-skinned foreigner slouched in a leather high-back chair in front of the fireplace. “Good morning. Congressman,” he started in slightly accented English. “I don’t have a lot of time. Just give me the...”

Sally burst into the office. “Sir, you have an urgent call on line one.”

“I told you to hold my calls!” he snapped.

“It’s Senator Slater. He said it was imperative that I interrupt you. He wouldn’t say why.” Jack Slater had clinched the Republican nomination by taking all of the Super Tuesday primaries. He was a sixty-eight-year-old conservative from South Carolina who captured the heart of the party—conservatives and moderates alike—a cross between Barry Goldwater and Ronald Reagan. Bookmakers were already making him the favorite over his tight-assed Democrat opponent.

Baker dismissed Sally with a flick of his chin, picked up the receiver, and brought his index finger to his lips to silence the man across from him. “Good morning. Senator.”

“And a good morning to you, Harmon. I want to discuss something very important. Are you alone?”

"Yes, sir," Baker said, knowing he had no secrets from his visitor. "What can I do for you today?"

"Like JFK said, 'It's not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country.' God, I hate to quote Democrats."

"I don't understand," the congressman said. "What are..."

"I want you on the ticket," Slater said in his trademark booming voice.

Harmon felt faint, his blood pressure shot up, and beads of sweat dampened his thick close-cropped gray hair.

"Harmon, you there?" Slater asked.

"Yes, Senator," he stammered. "But why me?"

"Lots of reasons, my friend. Most important, I believe you're qualified."

"But, Senator..."

"Listen buddy, we got a real chance to win this thing. Whadda ya say?"

There was lingering silence as Baker tried to absorb what he was hearing.

"So? What's it going to be? Yes? No? Or do you need to speak to your wife and get back to me?"

"Senator..."

"Please. Call me Jack."

"Jack, I'm honored. And for the first time in a long time, speechless. Can I have a bit of time to digest this and get back to you?"

"Sure you can," Slater said in a syrupy voice. Then he added, "You don't have any skeletons in your closet, do you, Harmon?"

"No, sir," the Arizona congressman said, glancing over at the heavyset man opposite him.

"Great. I'll look forward to speaking to you by tomorrow noon," Slater said. "And, Harmon, don't mention this to anyone except your wife."

The congressman from Arizona hung up the phone and stared at his visitor. He wondered how both their lives would be changed if he accepted Slater's offer. And it frightened him.