



**God's
Thunder**
by Ian Kohnats

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By Ian Kovnats

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Chapter One

The harsh ringing of the alarm clock made him turn over. With one long arm he stretched out and fumbled briefly before finding the infernal machine that was intruding on his dreams. With a deft slap of his bony hand he shut the shrill ringing off and opened his eyes. Looking up at the ceiling, Russ muttered a silent prayer to God, thanking him for letting him see another day.

Slowly he tossed aside the two thin sheets covering his body and then he flung his legs over the side, feeling the coldness of the wooden floor. He shivered slightly as he managed a long drawn out yawn, then he stretched his arms outwards slowly regaining feeling in his ancient body. Well it wasn't that ancient but some mornings he sure felt like it, even though he was only 44 years old last month.

Gradually Russ eased his 5 foot 10 inch frame off the bed and took his 215 pound body over to the bathroom to begin another day of his life. He looked into the mirror seeing the few lines that were forming around his eyes and on his forehead; and he could see the thinning strands of his hair as he splashed the cold water on his face. Well, at least he could still see his hair, even if it were on a constant retreat to the back of his head.

Picking up his razor, he started the daily shaving ritual even though he felt like just tossing it all. His eyes sparkled as he ran the buzzing machine over his cheeks that were a little heavier these days and under his chin that was determined to become the twin hills of Russell land; but all in all he couldn't complain too much. Besides, who was there to listen to his complaints other than God, and surely he knew them before Russ could even think them.

The sound of his doorbell ringing shocked Russ. Who in the hell would be calling on him at this ungodly hour of the morning? With a towel around in his body, he hurried towards the front door as the second chime of his bells echoed through the silent house.

Dabbing the last of the water from his face, Russ opened the door to reveal a tall young man in his early twenties with long flowing shoulder length hair. He had a pair of sunglasses on and seemed to tower over Russ.

"Yes?"

"Father Russ?"

"Well... that was a time back, but I was called Father Russ.

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And you are?"

"Okay... ah... you were Father Russ... from the parish on 9th Street?"

"Yes I was parish priest there for some years. What is this all about young man?"

"I guess you don't remember me then. I am Kevin."

"Kevin? Well let me think now... I had a Kevin Jorgeson, I think his name was, and then there was a Kevin MacNeely. Let me look at you boy; take those glasses off."

"Still the same Father Russ... okay... now do you recognize me?"

"Well, you certainly don't look like the little 14 year old hellion that gave me a rough time every Sunday; but I would say you are that Kevin MacNeely who loved to try and wriggle out of Sunday Choir practice... Am I right?"

"Hehe... yes Father, you are."

"Enough of that Father stuff... no longer a priest, so you can just plain call me Russ... So Kevin, what brings you here?"

"Well you will never be plain anything, at least not to me... and when I saw your name, well... I just had to come and see if it was the same Father Russ."

"Well it is, so now what? You want to come inside and have a cup coffee with your old tormentor? Fresh made!"

"Thank you Fath... sorry, Russ... yes that would be nice."

"Good, good, well come on, don't just stand there... come inside and have a seat on the couch there while I go get us some coffee. Sugar and cream?"

"No, black with one sugar will be fine."

Russ watched as Kevin sat down on the couch. His memory of the young Kevin was sharp in his mind; he was one of Russ' special boys. There was a certain special spot in his heart for a few of his boys, and Kevin had a large chunk of that special spot. My, he had grown up into an even more handsome young man then when he was that rebellious teenager. Russ smiled as he trotted into the kitchen to get the coffee. Well, visitors so early in the morning, and not only a visitor, but one of his special boys. This was certainly starting off to be one royal glorious day.

He came back into his living room to see the tall young man

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standing by his wall of favorites, a collection of photos from his years as choir master and Sunday school principal. He had a whole wall devoted to the young boys that had struck his fancy in his almost 25 years as a man of the cloth. Russ had entered the priesthood at the young tender age of 18 and here he was, 44 and newly retired from his life as a priest, no longer needing to hide his devotion to a God of love, no longer needing to hide his desire for another male's flesh.

The first thing he had done when moving into this house had been to gather his hundreds of photos and display them on one full side of the living room wall. Most of the wall was covered with the obligatory class group pictures symbolizing his many years as a priest. But he had taken almost one third of the wall to set aside for those he called his special boys. They didn't number more than 15, but he had several photos of each, some with other's, but mostly single pictures taken at a function or at some private moment. It was at this end of the wall that he found Kevin, his eyes roving the myriad of shots.

"Well here we are... come sit down and enjoy your coffee now, Kevin."

"Your wall of troublemakers, Father?"

"Hey, that might be one way to look at it I suppose."

"Am I in there Father?"

Russ stared at the tall young man who once graced his life at the church. Kevin MacNeely had been a real handful even then, but his face and eyes had set him apart from other's, even the older boys. There was no doubt that he would grow up to be a handsome lady killer, and here he was, more handsome than Russ' imagination had ever envisioned.

"Yes I do believe you are in there Kevin... over to the left I think."

"Really? You even know the spot my picture graces your wall?"

"Well Kevin, I like to keep track of all of my teenage hellions."

Kevin took his coffee and stood by the wall surveying the many pictures there, and he stared at his own youthful reflection. It was a snap shot taken down by the beach during a Sunday school outing. He saw the ribs sticking out; his skinny rump well defined in the tight black Speedo's that he was wearing. Man what a site he was, all that long hair flowing down his back. If you

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didn't know better, you'd swear it was a young girl standing there, but even in the old snapshot you could see he was all boy, at least from the front.

"It is amazing how you can look at an old picture and your mind goes back to those times. I certainly was a long haired freak back then."

"Back then? Hehe, you certainly had the looks then and you still do, you have turned out very nice Kevin, a real handsome devil you are... So tell me, you must be quite the lady killer now that you are what, 22 or 23?"

"Almost 26, Father Russ, almost. And a lady killer? No, far from that I guess."

Russ glanced at the back of the young man, saw his shoulders sag slightly as he spoke. Now what did that mean? He wondered as he sat silently watching the handsome young man stare at his wall. Patience Russ, he told himself as he sipped as his cooling coffee, patience.

Suddenly Kevin squared his shoulders and without taking his eyes from the pictures in front of him he began to reminisce about the days in the choir and Sunday school. He talked on about his life there, how he had enjoyed the way Russ had helped him with his homework and with his fitting in.

"Remember all those times I got into trouble with Father Mike? And how you defended me and kept me from getting expelled from Sunday school?"

"Oh yes, I remember that... you and Father Mike certainly locked horns a few times, if I recall."

"Yeah we didn't exactly see eye to eye, wonder what ever happened to him? There one day, gone the next."

"Yes, well, he had a few problems that needed some time away from the parish."

"Yes, he did... do you remember when you had to tell me that my dad had passed away Father Russ?"

This was certainly turning into a strange conversation. Here he was, his undershirt on, a robe covering him and his underpants, while this tall handsome ex-choirboy stared at a wall of pictures of young boys. Well, the Lord did move in mysterious ways, didn't he?

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"Yes I do Kevin."

"I do... I remember how you held me when I cried, how your arms held me tight against your chest, and I could feel your heart beating. The way you caressed my head, as I cried into that black cassock of yours. Do you remember that time Father?"

"Yes I do Kevin... it was a most difficult time for you then. I only hope that I was able to help in some small way."

"Oh you did Father, you did... it was then, while in your arms, that I came to realize just exactly what I was."

"What you were? Ah... I don't follow you Kevin?"

"When you held me Father, it felt so good, so safe, and when you patted me on the back and squeezed my arm, it was then I knew that I wanted to be with you, or at least with some man. It was then that I knew that I was gay, Father."

Russ almost choked on his coffee. He sputtered and had to put the cup down. Kevin turned to look at the startled face of his mentor, and he waited, his dark eyes carefully watching the older man catch his breath and gather his wits. Russ finally managed to calm his nerves and he stared up to look into the dark eyes of his once pupil.

"You decided what? Ah, excuse me Kevin... you certainly have given me a morning of surprises... how... I mean why... now how could my comforting you help you determine that you are a homosexual? I don't see the connection at all, I mean yes I held you, but that was out of care for your grief... surely you..."

"Now Father, don't get all flustered, I am not saying you did anything improper, not like Father Mike or some of the other's... no... it was just that, well, your tenderness confirmed to me my desires. I was thinking of my dad, dead, and how he was no longer going to be around to yell at me or throw me against the wall. It wasn't grief, Father, that made me cry... it was the knowledge that now that he was gone, my mother would move us away... and that was why I cried."

"Well... yes I recall you did leave very shortly after the funeral... your family just picked up and left town... to the north somewhere I believe... but how did all that make you believe you were a homosexual?"

"Easy... see... I was crying because I felt like I would never be able to know you better; and I could feel your desire under that cassock Father... forgive me... but, well, you didn't exactly

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hide it.”

Chapter Two

He had hit the couch hard, the coffee cup was broken on the hardwood floor, coffee spilt everywhere. As he fell to the couch, his robe lay open, exposing his checkered boxer shorts. Amazement at the calm statement by Kevin had put Russ into a state of shock. He sputtered as he spoke.

"But... I never... how could you even..."

Kevin was beside the ex priest now, kneeling on one knee carefully picking up the broken pieces of china as Russ sputtered and attempted to speak. He could see the amazement in Russ's face and a thin smile crossed his face.

"Easy Father... I don't want to give you a heart attack... now you just lay back there and I'll explain."

"Yes... yes I think an explanation would be helpful."

"Fine... now where can I put this broken china?"

"Uh... oh there is a waste basket by the bookshelf there."

"Thank you... now you just sit back and I'll get a rag from the kitchen and clean that up... now don't argue and besides, this way you can calm down a little."

It took awhile before Russ was able to think clearly. Here was one of his special boys, all grown up, fussing around him like a mother hen and cleaning up his mess. He still couldn't believe the simple confession that Kevin had given him. A part of him wished he had known earlier, but then it would only have made his last few years even more intolerable. At least now he could freely discuss his feelings and desires. Mind you, he never was one to keep his counsel to himself, and he still felt that it was this open frankness that led him to his decision to walk away from the priesthood just over a year ago.

Russ watched the young man bending down. He saw the young firm body as it wiped away the coffee from the wooden floor. His eyes were glued to every movement of the young muscular body while his brain kept comparing this tall young man with the gangling youth he knew before. He could clearly see the resemblance and he was starting to feel excited at having this special young boy here in his home now. Well, at least he didn't have to pretend that he was unmoved by the youth's grace and composure. With that in mind, he closed his robe around his middle covering up the stirring parts of his body.

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Kevin had seen the quick movement out of the corner of his eye and he smiled to himself as he finished wiping up the spilt coffee. Well at least the old guy didn't pass out on him. He rose to look down at Father Russ and with a wide grin on his face he walked off to put away the wet cloths.

"Here Father Russ... I brought you a fresh cup of coffee... now let's try not to drop this one... hehe."

"You always were a rascal Kevin MacNeely... that you were."

Russ took a careful sip of the hot coffee and watched the graceful young man move to a chair off to the side. He certainly had grown up to be a very handsome young man. And now he was here, and there were no restrictions on him, no authority to prevent him from expressing his feelings, and the idea of confessing his own desires to this fine specimen of a man certainly made parts of him stand up at attention. A smile crossed his face as he sipped at the bitter coffee. Seems young Kevin didn't put any sugar in it.

Kevin looked at his watch, seeing that time was fleeting and he had to get a move on. He also noticed the way that Russ moved on the couch, hiding the obvious growth in his middle leg. Well, it was kind of flattering to know he still could excite this man who he loved ever since he was introduced to him back at the church. Those certainly were different times, confusing one's, but at least now they were less confusing if not more hectic and dangerous.

"Father, I need your help."

"My help? And just how can I help you Kevin?"

Kevin stared at his coffee cup, afraid to look into the eyes of his former mentor and to be honest, to the only adult he ever trusted in those years. If it hadn't been for Father Russ' intervention all those years ago, who knows how he might have turned out. Well, he had a job to do now, and it wasn't always easy but he had little choice. He couldn't beg off the assignment and so here he was. Slowly, with a heavy heart he raised his troubled eyes to stare into the compassionate and caring face of a rather still startled friend.

"I guess I should tell you first that I am not really here socially..."

"No? And in what capacity are you here then Kevin?"

Something about the tone and the way Kevin tried to look at him, but couldn't, made Russ feel a chill go down his spine.

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There was something wrong and for some reason the messenger bringing it to him was from his past, which did not bode well. He composed himself inside, and with a look of concern he stared at young Kevin. He didn't really see the current Kevin, instead his eyes saw the young long haired youth who was always getting into trouble, always trying to get his attention. Well, he had it now.

"Father... I... uh..."

"Come on now Kevin... spit it out."

"Always the teacher, hey Father? Yes, I suppose I should just get it out."

Kevin stood up now, to his full height, and he walked back to the wall of special pictures. He studied them closely once more but he wasn't really seeing the photos there. Instead, he was seeing something else, something that had brought him here to his old mentor's home. A small tear trickled down his face. Squaring his shoulder, Kevin turned back to face Father Russ.

"Father... I work with the police department now... in the sexual abuse division."

"Really? That must be a very tough assignment Kevin... but what does that have to do with me? Surely you aren't..."

"No Father Russ... Russ... no it isn't about you or a complaint against you."

"Well I know that Kevin... come now... what is this all about?"

"Do you know the youth center on Front Street?"

"Well, yes I do... I have done some volunteer work there over the years... in fact the parish runs that center Kevin... as I am sure you know... what is this all about Kevin?"

"Father R... Russ... I need to be very careful here... we have been getting a great deal of complaints from parents. My Captain is sure that something is going on... and well, I need your help in finding out."

"My help? Now just a minute here Kevin... you looked me up... why?"

"Father, this is too important to... aw look Father Russ."

"Please stop calling me 'Father'... I am no longer a priest Kevin."

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"Okay... okay... it is just hard to break the habit."

"So I see... now what is it you expect of me, Kevin?"

"I thought... well... uh... I want you to go back and work there... sort of as an inside man..."

"Now just a minute Kevin... you are asking me to go and pretend to be a volunteer worker when in fact you want me to spy on my brethren there? My God man, how can you even suggest a thing?"

"For the kids... do you think I would ask if it weren't important? Are those kids on that wall merely for show, Father Russ? Are they?"

Russ was dumbfounded by the violent words. He felt like he had just been knocked down for the count by a heavy weight prize fighter. That was certainly a low blow and damn it, he did care about all of those boys and he had done his best to protect them; and yes, even from his brethren; but he had only been one lone voice in a cavern. Was he to blame for his failure? He had done his best hadn't he? Or had he?

Kevin stared at his mentor; his breathing was rapid but slowly returning to normal. He had made the cardinal mistake in police work, he had let it get personal, and now here he was trying to force someone to help him in his own personal agenda. Damn he knew that Father Russ could do it, but he also knew it was hard to ask a man to spy on those whom he used to call 'brother.' But the kids, if it weren't for them... well, he had his mission, he couldn't do anything years ago, he was only a child then. But now, now he had the means and the authority to do something. He couldn't just walk away, not this time. Somehow, he had to find the strength to convince this man to help him, no matter what it took. For a brief instant he considered an obvious approach, but no, that would only alienate the man; and besides, he really had cared for him back then. He owed him something for that.

"Father... I..."

"Enough Kevin... enough, please... I am not a priest anymore, but what you ask of me... I cannot be a Judas... not at this stage of life... not at any stage... what you are asking..."

"I am not asking you to be a Judas, Father Russ... yes I know you aren't a priest... but aren't those vows you took for life? Can you just walk away from them now? Look... I know how much it pained you back then... to not be able to do more... now is your chance, Father..."

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"My chance? What are you saying, Kevin? My God, am I that hopeless or that much of a failure, Kevin?"

Russ looked up into Kevin's eyes. He didn't see condemnation there, but he did see disappointment. 'Oh my God' he thought, had he been such a failure? Could he have done more for the kids back then? No... he was sure he had done his best; he had his obligation to the church didn't he? To help keep it safe and free to do its good works? Surely that had to count for something in the after life, didn't it?

Kevin could see the battle raging inside his old mentor. There was pity for this man, who really was a good man, inside. He could recall the tenderness that Russ had shown all of them, the way he had disciplined them with compassion and how it was far worse to know you had disappointed Father Russ than it was to get the paddle. He knew he was being unfair in his attack, but he couldn't help it. Those kids, their helplessness and their innocence were too precious to allow some pervert hiding behind a false code of ethics to subvert. He had to stop it, at least here, and he had to make Father Russ see that, somehow.

"Father Russ... please. Listen to me... I am not..."

"No Kevin... I'll not listen anymore to this... not now Kevin MacNeely... do you hear? Not now..."

"Please Father... I beg you..."

"NO! No... I can't listen to this now... you must leave me alone... you can't expect me to help you... I won't be a Judas... do you hear me Kevin... I WON'T BE A JUDAS!"

With that emphatic answer, Father Russ rose to his full height and he stood straight. The pain in his heart was tearing him apart. He saw the absolute look of disappointment in Kevin's face and it only made him ache even more. How sad he felt right now, how all alone he felt as he walked to the door, signaling that Kevin's presence was no longer wanted. His hand shook slightly as he grabbed the door knob and opened his front door.

The sun had been shining, and as he opened the door it fell behind a dark cloud and Father Russ watched the golden rays of the sun slowly sink away from his face to hide behind a dark cloud. Well Lord, he thought... I am merely a mortal man and I must do what I think best... I have not your strength and I must protect the church. It is all that stands between man and eternal damnation... no matter how much it pains me.

Kevin walked slowly towards the opened door. He was angry and also very sad. For a brief moment, when he had seen

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his picture on that wall, he thought there might be a chance, now he didn't know what he was going to do. Slowly he gathered himself together and with a definite reluctance, he headed out of the house of his mentor, knowing that his presence no longer brought joy to the one man who he wished above all other's to make proud of him. Instead, he had screwed up, and now the one person's opinion that mattered to him was turned against him. Small tears formed at the corners of his eyes as he walked out the door.

As he came to stand next to his old mentor, he could barely stand to look into those eyes that he once lived to see shine at him. He knew they weren't shining at him now; he knew they weren't twinkling with pride for him now, and his own heart was tearing itself apart with the pain of it all.

"I am sorry Father Russ... I really am sorry... I... here... this is my card... please... don't hate me Father... I couldn't stand it if you hated me..."

Father Russ was at the point of tears. The soft words of Kevin almost touched off a flood of emotions and he didn't know what to say. He reached out with a shaky hand to gather in the small business card and with his last ounce of inner strength he managed to raise his head to look up into the pale eyes of Kevin.

"I could never hate you Kevin... never in a million years. I am an old man now my boy... old before my time I guess... forgive me for that, if you can..."

Russ took the card and slowly closed the door on his former protege. His heart was aching and he walked carefully to the medicine cabinet in the bathroom where he mixed himself a tall glass of Alka-Seltzer. The relief was instant for the burning pain in his throat, but the pain in his heart did not ease. Shuffling his feet, Father Russ returned to his bedroom and he proceeded to slowly and hesitantly get himself dressed.