



The Dragon

&

The Detective

*Book Two of
Dragon Tales
& Stories*

**Drew
Henriksen**

Dragon Tales & Stories



DREW HENRIKSEN

Dragon Tales & Stories
Book Two

The Dragon and the Detective

A Novel By

Drew Henriksen

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Dedication

Holly, Karl, Nora and Rich

And a Special Thanks to Tom Crean
for his expertise



Chapter 1

THE DETECTIVE

“How could this happen?” Frank asked Petey. “That little shit fucked with me for the last time!”

The boss was mad. Petey had *never* seen him like this. It made him very nervous. When people like the boss got pissed, they became very stupid—and very mean.

Keeping his eyes on the road, Petey tried to defuse the situation before it escalated. “Boss, he’s a cop. You can’t touch him. Give it time, it will blow over.”

“Fuck that noise!” Frank shouted, crushing his cigar in his hand. “That shithead is getting people to notice us.”

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Petey thought that notion was funny, ironic really, since they were driving a stretch limo. Wisely, he kept that fact to himself. Now that he'd been promoted to Frank's driver, he watched every word, every syllable that came out of his mouth. With the shit just beginning to hit the fan, he wished he had been passed over.

"I'm going to get that worm! I'm going to get him, *and* his family," Frank growled.

Petey didn't like hearing this. Just knowing the boss wanted to go after this guy's family made him an accessory. Offing straight cops and their kids was not his thing. Offing jamokes in the business was okay; they knew what they were getting into.

"Boss, listen to yourself. It's not smart." *There, I said it,* Petey thought. *Maybe I shouldn't have.*

Petey realized he shouldn't have immediately. He got the worst of all responses, silence. It seemed like a half an hour before Frank spoke. The dreaded diamond pinky ring started tapping on the window.

"You think I'm stupid?" Frank asked.

"No boss, I said it wasn't smart to go after a cop. Especially one like this." Petey tried to explain without showing his growing fear.

"And what am I supposed to do, Professor Dumbo? Let people see this shit walk all over me?" Frank dictated more than asked.

"He's baiting you, boss. What he has on you is nothing big." Petey's voice cracked.

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"You know, Petey, you're right. Instead of showing who's top dog around here, I'll let everyone see me with my dick limp! I used to like you, Petey."

Oh shit!! This isn't good!

"Pull up to Oscar's. I need more cigars," Frank said softly.
If I'm lucky, he'll just get another driver.

Oscar's was one of a few cigar shops that could get cigars from Havana. The parking lot itself was small, a bitch to pull into, and the angle sucked. To get the long limo in Petey had to make the turn from two lanes over. The last thing he wanted to do at that moment was to pull in and out fifteen times. Luckily, it was late at night and the traffic was nothing. Something had actually gone right and Petey was able to pull the limo in with ease.

"Go in and get me two boxes, and I don't want to hear your fucking mouth the rest of the night. *Capish?*" Frank announced.

Petey nodded his head, got out, and disappeared into the small shop. Frank Gercio stewed in his leather seat. As soon as he got back to the house, he decided, he was going to get rid of this dumbass driver. Nobody seemed to have any balls any more, except his daughter. The one person Frank Gercio was actually worried about was his only child. Stupid ass cops did not phase him in the least. But how did that dick, Scalici, know to bust the market at that exact time? Maybe pussy boy in the shop had been talkin'. Nobody messed with him or his business, *nobody*. The cop lived on Long Island and had a daughter. Frank decided he was going to show this cop what

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it was like to lose something close. That's what happens when you fuck with Frank Gercio.

Dickhead was taking too long in the shop. Frank was about to go in himself and pop him for being such a slow, fucking idiot. But who would drive? He didn't want to, he'd just wait till they got home.

Then it occurred to him—it was quiet.

The middle of Queens was dead silent. There were no cars, people, or anything. Granted it was 1:00 AM—still, this was fucking Queens!

He heard something faint, a *whoosh*.

Then it was quiet again. Looking out the window of the limo, the tinted glass made it hard to see anything with clarity.

Whoosh.

What the fuck was that?

Whoosh.

This time he heard it even louder.

WHOOSH.

It sounded as if something were right above him.

With a powerful jolt and scream of tearing sheet metal, what appeared to be an enormous horn of a rhino penetrated the roof and tore through the headliner. At first, Frank thought it was going to pierce his head, but it just curled up and clamped on. Two horns burst through the bulletproof windows in a shower of glass. The limo lurched forward, sending Frank sprawling across the carpeted floorboard over the rear facing seat and into the glass divider in the back of the

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driver's seat, face first. His nose squashed on contact with the glass as he felt the whole car lift off the ground. The rear facing seat and glass divider seemed to be the new bottom of the car as Frank's stomach dropped. He recalled only feeling this way when a plane took off.



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Fumbling and struggling, Frank managed to turn his body around. Another horn had appeared in the back window. What lay beyond that was too incredible to believe: a sleek, reptilian tail—*a long-ass fucking tail!* Behind that image was the panoramic skyline of New York getting real small, real fast.

The gun!

Frank kept a .357 Mag in the side door compartment. Unfortunately, the side compartment was now located above his head. The limo was bobbing back and forth like a toy, and all the secret compartments flew open with each jolt. Frank noticed the gun compartment was already open. Putting his hands down, he felt exactly what he wanted to feel: the long cold barrel of his gun.

“Fuck You!” Frank screamed and fired, but quickly remembered why you should never shoot inside a bulletproof car. The bullet ricocheted off the horn, window, side panel, then penetrated the soft tissue of his kneecap.

“Sonofabitch!” he cried.

When he opened his eyes again and saw all the “horns” at once, it suddenly dawned on him: *They’re not horns; they’re tails.*

Back at the store, Petey came out to an empty parking lot.

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This was the worst time of the day for Craig, and he wasn’t even out of bed yet. Waking up before the alarm went

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off was, hands down, the most dreaded time imaginable. His body wanted to stay in bed, but at any moment that “click” would go off, followed by awful country music. Craig purposely set the alarm on country because he had to get up to shut it off. Another smart move was placing it on the other side of the room so he physically had to get out of bed to shut it off.

It was still dark out. If God was merciful to him, it was only 2:00 AM. However, since it was the end of August, 2:00 AM and 4:30 AM looked identical outside. For once, his mind was clear. Every once in a while, a good sleep purged all the bad shit out of his head and he could just relax. It was wonderful to feel the softness off the sheets and pillow. At any moment, though, there was going to be a click, then some corncob yodeling. After that came the drive into work on the wonderful Long Island Expressway.

Oh joy of joys, God bless Queens. Maybe it was still 2:00 AM?

Craig had been dreaming, and sometimes when he awoke from a dream, it seemed like the next day when it was really only two hours later. And it was a wonderful dream—the one where he was flying again. This time it was over the Catskill mountains. Lakes and forested mountainsides passed beneath him as he soared toward the horizon. He was alone. Meredith wasn’t with him. Odd. Still the dream was so peaceful it made him feel good and horny as hell. Maybe that’s why Meredith wasn’t in it.

Ring.

No.

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Ring.

No, not the phone! This early, the phone always meant shit had hit the fan. Energy came quickly as wakefulness rushed through Craig's body.

"Hello!" he answered as if he had been up for hours.

"Get that scrawny white butt in here Scalici. Gercio's been hit, I think," Aisha cracked.

"What do you mean 'you think'?" Craig rebuffed.

"I mean get in here now!" Aisha returned.

"Okay, I'm on my way." Craig grunted and pressed the receiver down, then dialed again. It took two rings before Mrs. Snow answered.

"Yes, Craig?" Mrs. Snow answered.

"How did you know it was me?" Craig asked, almost offended.

"Who else would it be? I'll send Jeannine right down," Mrs. Snow responded as she always did.

"I owe you," Craig replied.

"Yeah, the rent. Don't forget," she added and hung up.

Craig lay there for a second, contemplating checking on his daughter before he left. He decided it would be better if he didn't; she might wake up. The radio clicked and Tammy Wynette started to sing.

"Stand by your maaaaan...."

"Ugh," Craig moaned.

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Aisha Barlow had been Craig's partner for only a year and a half. Out of all the detectives they could have placed her with, she felt God purposely had a hand in the paring of the two. Nobody made her think like he did. Sometimes she felt like his daughter, sometimes she felt like his wife, but most of the time she felt like his mother. He could handle the shits they went after, and even some of his fellow officers when the need arose. Yet, she still always had the feeling he was like a child lost in the big city. This was her woman's intuition at work; the rest of the men they worked with could not see these qualities in Craig, but she could.

She was worried about him. Gercio was powerful and stupid, a dangerous combination. Craig had the uncanny ability to get under his skin and wrap his nerves in tinfoil. If he wasn't a detective, he would have made a great mob dentist. It also worried her that Craig would push somebody without fear of reprisal. Gercio would push back, and only once. What happened tonight, she felt, was the start of something big. Gercio would not leave this earth without a mechanism in place to get rid off the irritants in his life. Craig was the biggest.

Craig entered the room unshaven with a bad clip-on tie. That was fresh as a daisy in Scalici terms. Aisha sat on her desk enjoying her normal bagel with cream cheese and 7-11 coffee. It could only be 7-11 coffee. The chemical the squad room Mr. Coffee made was toxic, and thus, saved for lawyers. Only two other plain clothes men were in the room. Of course, she had a bagel and coffee for Craig. Lord knows he

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wouldn't think to get them for himself.

"So what happened? Was Gercio whacked or what?" Craig asked, trying to fix his tie and grabbing the coffee at the same time.

"You're welcome," Aisha said, looking at the coffee.

"Oh, thanks." Craig asked, "Okay, so what happened?"

"Gercio and his limo disappeared from Oscar's Cigar Shop. The driver said he wasn't gone from the car more than two minutes and it disappeared with Gercio in it. According to the driver, Gercio didn't like to drive, and even if he did drive away, it would have taken awhile to maneuver the limo out of the parking lot."

"What about his house, anybody call to see if he was home?" Craig stuffed half the bagel down with one bite.

"Called the house on Staten Island, as well as the girlfriend Tina's apartment. Nothing."

"What about the daughter?" Craig already knew the answer. "Up in Livingston?"

"Once she stopped calling me every racial slur in the book, she said no." Aisha smiled sarcastically.

Craig felt there was something else.

"And why the shit-eating grin?" he asked.

"The driver, Peter Cusamano, he's in the back asking for protection." She smiled wider.

With his mouth half full of bagel and coffee, he let it hang open revealing it for all to see. "He's talking?"

"He wants to talk," she repeated.

Craig looked up and saw the other two men looking on,

elated.

“Did you hear that shit?” Craig spoke with food flying out of his mouth. “He’s gonna talk!”

The others in the room start to clap.

•

Petey sat in the interrogation room alone. *How could so much go wrong so quickly?* No matter what really happened, Marcella was going to blame him. He was supposed to protect Frank to the death. There was nothing to suggest a hit. There were no cars; they didn’t stop at Oscar’s on a regular basis. Maybe he wasn’t even dead; maybe he just drove off in a rage? But how could he have gotten the limo out of that tight little parking lot so quickly?

Over and over Petey played the evening’s events in his mind: He went into the shop. Oscar handed him the Havanas; he didn’t have to ask. What else? He remembered thinking he had to get back soon before the boss lost it altogether. The weather was getting bad; he heard the wind picking up. He would have heard the engine start.

I’m being watched, he thought.

Looking at the mirror he could just imagine who was on the other side, gloating. A few hours ago he would have given it the finger; now his life depended on whoever was behind it. A cold draft blew over his hands that sent a chill right up to his jaw, which started to tremble. He felt it wasn’t the mirror watching, the whole room was. The door flew open and 250-

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pound Petey jumped a good foot and a half.

Craig and Aisha walked in. They'd dealt with Petey before he was a major player. Now it was about to pay off. Craig ran right up to him and pinched his checks.

"Petey, if you weren't so butt-ugly I'd kiss ya." Craig laughed.

"You do and I'll belt ya!" Petey shot back.

Craig turned back to Aisha.

"You hear that, Detective Barlow? He threatened me." Craig smiled.

"Heard it loud and clear," Aisha nodded.

Craig turned and put his face right into Petey's, his smile turning into a childlike grin.

"Listen, you fat fuck. The only reason you're here is to save your fat ass from Marcella. When she hears, and she already did, that you let her dad get whacked, your balls are fish food." Craig spoke in his psychopathic child voice, "Now you speak when you're spoken to, or you get no cream puffs after dinner."

Petey just looked at him and nodded.

"Now tell me what happened," Craig said as he backed away.

"Um, I'm want a lawyer here. I'll tell you everything Ger-cio did, but get me counsel," Petey begged.

Craig stared at him and reality began to raise its head a bit.

Craig's tone became serious. "What scared you, really? Off the record. What makes a big guy like you so nervous? You

know we can hide you.”

“No you can’t. What happened tonight is proof of that,” Petey blurted out.

“Explain.” Craig sounded almost sympathetic.

“Look at how he fucking disappeared! You fucking noticed?” Petey ranted. “They weren’t hit. They just die or disappeared all together.”

The detectives gave a quick glance at each other. They knew exactly what he meant. The Gercios never put a contract out on anyone big. Small thugs were taken care of by their soldiers. But bigger fish would unexplainably die or disappear. *The Post* actually started calling him Lucky Gercio.

Aisha asked, “You mean nobody actually killed those people?”

“Not by regular means. But if you ask me, Marcella did it somehow.” Petey explained, “If she didn’t like you, you were gone. The word was, *she* was the real boss.”

“Do you actually think Marcella got rid of Frank?” Craig asked, completely enthralled.

Petey nodded his head.

Aisha noticed how cold it was in the room. She could see breath coming out of the two men’s mouths as they spoke. A knock on the door nearly stopped her heart.

“Come in!” she yelled with a heartbeat of at least 120.

One of the officers popped his head in with a bewildered look.

“They found the limo and maybe Gercio,” the young officer advised.

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"Where?" Craig asked.

"Albany," he answered.

"Albany, New York?" Aisha replied.

"Upstate, New York, Albany," the young cop repeated. "Do you want me to turn the heat up or something? It's freezing in here."

Craig noticed the mirror; it had frost on it.

•

"Wake up, sleepy head," Jeannine's voice called out. "We're going to the beach."

Meredith opened her eyes and saw Jeannine's face, a sight that was more common than her dad's.

"I made some chocolate chip pancakes for ya," Jeannine smiled.

"Did Daddy get called into work early?" the seven year old asked. "I heard the phone ring, then he cursed out the sock drawer for not opening."

"Yeah, he did, and don't repeat any of those words he used, either. Now get dressed. Once you eat, we can catch the 7:10 bus to the ferry to the beach." Jeannine ruffled Meredith's hair.

Meredith loved it when Jeannine babysat her. She was the coolest, and she was sixteen! She always baked the best cookies, and every time they went out, all the boys came over to talk. Meredith decided that when she got older, she was going to be just like her, and double-date with her. Too bad Daddy

wasn't seventeen; they'd be perfect together. Jeannine hopped out of the room in her cool cutoffs with all the fancy embroidery, her braided ponytail bobbing up and down. Meredith couldn't believe that a mean woman like Mrs. Snow could have such a nice daughter. Then again Mrs. Snow's own mom was a nice lady.

Meredith got out of her bed and went to get her favorite bathing suit out of the drawer. Grandma Messinal had given it to her at the beach house. Most of Grandma's gifts were fuddy-duddy, but the bathing suit was just the coolest. None of that Barbie junk was cool; the sunset printed on the suit was *very* cool. She pulled it out, fraying seams and all, leaving the six other suits behind. The smell of the pancakes hit her nose, making her stomach churn in anticipation. The day was going to be just the best.

She soon forgot all about her dream of flying the night before.

•

Craig and Aisha made it to the field in three hours with Craig driving. The trip to Albany usually took four. A dozen state troopers swamped the middle of the field so neither one could see what they were gawking at. Craig didn't bother parking on the side of the road. He drove the car right up to the crowd of troopers, none of whom seemed to care. He got out first and no one approached their car. Craig and Aisha exchanged looks, then he reached in the car and blared the horn.

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All the troopers jumped and grabbed their guns.

"Yo, by any chance is there someone in charge here?" Craig hollered in his normal sarcastic tone.

The troopers stared at him for a moment then to Aisha. From the cluster, a six-foot-five Lieutenant emerged with a perplexed expression on his face. This was not a man that got frazzled easily; today he was.

"Are you Scally and Barlow?" the lieutenant asked.

"That's Scalici," Craig replied. "Why the huddle?"

The Lieutenant didn't say a word. He just motioned them over. Like the Red Sea, the troopers parted. At first glance the detective thought they were looking at a large tan-gray rock with white spots. Then as they both moved closer, Craig noticed one of the white spots was a cow skull. As he looked closer, he realized the whole mass was nothing but a pile of fur and bones. Like a meteorite, it was imbedded in the ground as if a plane had dropped it.

"Now you tell me detective, have you any clue as to what the hell that thing is?" The lieutenant crossed his arms, thinking: if Kojak here, had the answer, he was hanging up his gun and retiring the next day.

"Beats the shit out of me," Craig answered.

"At least you're honest, Kojak." the lieutenant replied, taking his hat off and scratching his head. "Thirty-three years I've been doing this. I can't begin to explain this."

"Where's the limo?" Aisha asked. "They said you found Frank Gercio's limo."

"Other side ma'am," he said, walking around the twenty-

foot lump.

"It looks like a turd," Craig remarked, looking at all the leg bones and skulls. There was even a cowbell in it. He sniffed the air. "It don't smell like shit though."

"Smells like a science room from school," Aisha noted.

The lieutenant stopped dead. "Acid, that's what it is! Acid!" he realized. "*That* would explain it."

"Explain what?" Craig cried in frustration.

The Lieutenant pointed to the lump. Craig and Aisha looked in the mass of fur and saw the back end of the limo. The paint was gone leaving shiny steel reflecting back at them. Surprisingly, the license plate was untouched and read 'Gercio One'.

"Jesus H. Christ!" was the only words to escape Craig's mouth.

He went over to the bumper and grabbed it.

"Don't touch that!" Aisha yelled at him.

"Jesus Christ. It just disappeared last night. When was it found?" Craig asked, in a dream like state.

"Early this morning. Residents say they heard a loud crash around 4:00 AM."

"That's only three hours from the time he disappeared. Anybody check inside?" Craig asked.

"No! If you want to burrow in, Kojak, go right ahead," the lieutenant said, almost laughing. "I'm washing my hands of this. It's all yours."

"That's big of ya, Smokey," Craig shot back.

Something caught Craig's eye. A few feet to the side, there

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was a little fleck of gold. Something reflected from a cow skull eye socket. Without thinking, Craig walked over and grabbed the skull. His fingers dug deep into the fur around it giving little resistance. To Craig, it felt like a papier-mâché sculpture Meredith made in school. Watching, half the troopers and Aisha winced as Craig stuck his other hand around the skull. He pulled it out sending a cloud of fur in the air. In the open cavity left behind lay the skeletal remains of a human hand, with a gold pinky ring still on it.

“Frank, there you are! Your family’s been worried,” Craig said in all seriousness.

“Excuse me ma’am,” the lieutenant said to Aisha, “but your partner is one strange individual.”

“Yes. Yes, he is,” she confirmed.

•

By the time Craig and Aisha made it to Albany, Jeannine and Meredith had already been at the beach for several hours. They caught the 7:30 ferry out of Bay Shore across the Great South Bay to Atlantique Beach. Jeannine had taken her there so often; she was even enrolled in the summer camp the town provided.

For Meredith, Jeannine was more than a mother’s helper. Since her mother was gone, Jeannine was her replacement mother. She barely remembered what her own mother looked like. Except for the pictures in Grandma and Grandpa’s beach house, she only had one memory of her mom. She had been

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crying because she didn't like her food, so her mommy had slapped her. She did get Christmas and birthday gifts from her, but they were really from Grandma—she could recognize the handwriting. At one o'clock, the camp was going to the Sunken Forest for a nature walk further down the beach. It was right next to Dune's Point where mommy's parents lived, but she knew her dad would get mad if she called them.

"What's on your mind?" Jeannine asked.

Meredith was in her own little world again, eating a big chili dog at the picnic table while Jeannine had gone to get more lemonade. The concession stand guy liked Jeannine and always gave her free food.

"I was wondering if I should call grandma and grandpa." Meredith looked up from her "Lets go Mets" cap.

"You know how your dad feels. He doesn't want them to know that I watch you so often," Jeannine reminded her as she sat on top of the table.

"Do you think my mom is there?" Meredith asked out of the blue.

"Well, since she didn't go there the last time you were over, I doubt it," Jeannine answered, as she chomped down on her own chili dog. Half the content slipped out the other end and landed with a splat on the table.

Immediately both girls started to laugh.

"Eew, that's gross!" Meredith exclaimed.

"Not as gross as this." Jeannine laughed, and poured some of her lemonade on it.

"EEEW!" both of them squealed.

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Meredith shivered, which was instantly noticed by Jeannine.

"You okay, squirt?" Jeannine asked

"I'm fine, I just got a chill," Meredith replied, suddenly feeling sick to her stomach.

"You don't look so fine."

"Can I go to the forest now? I don't like it here, somebody's watching me," Meredith said, her voice grave.

"Of course somebody's watching you! Me!" Jeannine replied.

The cold feeling of her being watched vanished and Meredith felt warm and good inside.

"You're the best," Meredith smiled.

"I know." Jeannine smiled back, grabbing Meredith's head and giving her a noogie.

•

"So let me get this straight," Aisha began with Craig as they crossed over the Tapenzee Bridge. "Gercio was offed by a cattle rancher and dissolved in acid with a herd of cattle."

"No, no, no, it was a symbol of some type. Maybe he had links to the meat packing business that we didn't know about," Craig said, fumbling for an explanation.

"If you believe that, I have some swamp land to sell you," she quipped, rocking her head back and forth.

"You know, I don't care," Craig sang and started to tap his hands on the wheel. "Gercio's gone and Petey is going to put the rest of them in jail."

"You think Petey is going to rat out the whole family?"

"Did you see the look in his eyes? He's terrified. Marcella probably has a contract out on him already."

"You heard what Petey said. They don't put out contracts. Things just happen."

"Things don't 'just happen'," Craig boasted, knowing the answer. "They don't tell people what they're doin'. Then they can't squeal on them."

"What about Marcella?"

"What? I don't care how mean she is. Mob guys will never take orders from a woman. It would be mass castration for them."

"You don't think this whole thing is odd? What the hell was that stuff the limo was in?"

"Some type of fabric or papier-mâché. What? Do you think its some type of voodoo or witchcraft?"

"It's not normal! And before you get your hopes up on Petey, you'd better find out what happened last night."

"So what do you think is more powerful, voodoo or witchcraft?" he asked, pretending to be serious.

God, she hated it when he did that.

"You're gonna have to deal with bitchcraft if you don't watch it," she warned. After a moment she answered, "Voodoo, of course."

"I'd have to disagree," Craig said, edging her on.

"I know you do, even when people are right you do. And I'm going to have to save your ass one of these days because of it."

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Craig stayed strangely silent as they approached the toll-booth.

"How did they get him up there?" he asked out loud.

"They had to pay tolls?"

"I thought you didn't care?" she said triumphantly.

•

It was a quarter to four by the time they got back the station. If Craig wasn't completely fixated on how Gercio was skeletonized inside of his limo, along with a dozen head of cattle, he would have noticed the lobby and hallway were unusually empty. Aisha thought it odd, especially, to see Devaney by the cooler all by himself.

"Yo, Devaney, where is everyone?" she asked him.

"They're up in Harlem looking to fill our darkey quota," Devaney giggled and sneered.

"Thank the Lord you fill our stupid quota, or your hometown would be milked dry," Aisha dished back. She almost felt bad for Devaney. As her father always said: "You can't have a battle of wits with an unarmed man."

Devaney immediately grabbed his crotch.

"Child, you wish you had them."

She almost felt sorry for him. Devaney was one of the good ol' boys in the precinct. With his crew cut and pressed white shirt, he was the Anti-Craig.

"Did Devaney seem like a bigger prick than normal today?" she asked an oblivious Craig.

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"Maybe they used a helicopter?" he thought out loud. "Maybe with a big industrial junkyard magnet mounted on it, they picked it up?"

"Are you in Scalici world again?" she asked rolling her eyes.

"No," he quickly answered. "Devaney's always a big prick!"

Of course Craig made sure he was loud enough to let Devaney hear him. Craig always knew how to get to people with his mouth; rarely did she ever see him use physical force. Yet, unlike others with a quick wit, he was quite capable of backing it up with force. Aisha didn't need Craig to protect her, that's why God invented guns. Devaney though, seemed to be the type to be somewhere else when you needed back up.

The two of them entered the squad room and were immediately surprised. A giant banner reading, "CONGRATULATIONS," was sprawled across the back wall. The room was filled with all of the other officers of the precinct, and cases of beer stacked on the desk. All at once they began to applaud.

"What the fuck is this?" Craig blurted, never being one for couth.

"Just shut your trap and appreciate it!" yelled Chip.

Chip O'Hanlen was Craig's best friend from the academy; before Craig's daughter Meredith was born, they were inseparable. To Craig, that was a lifetime ago. For Chip, it seemed like last month. With the exception of Aisha, Chip was the person closest to Craig, and stood up for him many times.

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Even though they were all in the same brotherhood, Chip found it harder and harder to get his cohorts to remember Craig the way he was. It almost came to blows with Devaney trying to get the party off the ground.

"I don't know about my sidekick here, but I want some cake!" Aisha said as she moved past Craig.

"Baby, we got devil's food cake just for you," Chip said, lifting a devil's food cake off one of the desks.

"Chip, if I weren't married with three kids, I'd make you my wife," Aisha joked. Chip was one of the few in the precinct she actually felt comfortable with.

"I'm all yours baby." Chip joked back.



Chapter 2

THE LADY WAITS

The ferry ride home seemed to take forever. What took only twenty minutes in the morning always felt like an hour and a half in the late afternoon. Meredith clenched her final science project for camp. She had to make her very first oral report on her results. Visions of Earth-shattering discoveries ran through her head as she envisioned herself in another ten years or so. Thus, many secrets that only her superior scientific mind could sort out, were placed in her Barbie bag. Jeannine was beside the bench talking to two of the lifeguards who had

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been at the beach. Even Meredith could tell what flirting was; nevertheless, Jeannine would always give her a quick wink to let her know she was keeping an eye on her.

The rattle of the old Fire Island Queen vibrated harder and harder as it trudged across the bay. Meredith didn't like having her teeth shaking in her head like that, especially after a hard day at the beach and camp. As the ferry made its last turn into Bayshore, the sun shone directly on her face. A summer's worth of tanning had made her impervious to pain so all she felt was warmth. She sat and watched all the high school kids making out and rolling their own shiny cigarettes. They were all just the coolest.

Bitch!

A voice spoke in her head. Meredith looked around as the weird feeling from before came back to her. An icy ribbon of cold ran up her back, as if an ice cold thread was being placed there, wrapping itself around her neck.

That's weird, she thought.

It tightened around her like a noose.

All at once, Meredith couldn't breath. Dropping her bag, she immediately put her hands around her throat. Under her fingers she could actually feel an icy ring around her neck.

Relax, she told herself, *it's all in your head.*

The grip grew tighter.

She tried to yell for help, but no words came out. Her head grew fuzzy and she felt as if it were going to explode.

"Meredith?" Jeannine's voice came to her through the haze. "Are you okay?"

Immediately the cold ribbon disappeared and the sun's warmth bathed her again. She looked up to see her babysitter standing over her with the lifeguards looking on. Meredith took a deep gasp and began to cough.

"I was just holding my breath, just like Shirley Babasoff did in the Olympics," Meredith lied.

"She was swimming at the time, and she didn't hold her breath!" Jeannine scolded.

"I'm sorry."

"You're tired! And your dad's gonna have my head if he finds out you're depriving yourself of oxygen!"

"I won't do it again," she said, knowing it was the voice that tried to choke her.

•

"What do ya mean, you're splitting?" Chip asked, more annoyed than questioning.

"I got to get home! Plain and simple!" Craig repeated.

"Buddy, the whole world knows what a good father you are. But this is ridiculous. You don't know the time I had getting this party off the ground," Chip emphasized.

"And I appreciate it. But I have to get home, you know how she is," Craig explained, putting on his jacket.

"I have an idea. I'm her godfather. Can't you take some time for yourself?" Chip began to scold, "Like it or not, you have a family here, too. And they don't like getting the cold shoulder. You can take the time to celebrate at least once with them, show them you're one of them."

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"Neither one of us are in our twenties anymore. They can go beering it up tonight with my blessing. Hell, send me the tab, but my daughter comes first."

"My kids come first too, always will. But listen to me buddy; hang out for just an hour more. You and Aisha did a phenomenal job, let them show some respect."

"Why don't you take Aisha out? She did half the work," Craig suggested in an obvious set up.

Without saying a word, Chip grimaced. "But she's not one of the guys. It would be like guzzling with your mother."

"Well, at least you're not raciest, just a sexist," Craig sneered.

"And you're ungrateful. We're your friends, too, remember?" Chip shot back.

"Not all of you," Craig pointed out. "Please, go out, and the first two rounds are on me."

"Don't do this, buddy."

Craig started for the door, looking at his watch. Most of the heads in the room turned and saw him leave, including Aisha. The volume immediately began to wane as if a knob had lowered their voices. Aisha acted quickly to minimize the frost.

"Chip, did you make a pass at him again?" Aisha cracked.

"No way, hon. I'm saving it all for you," he bantered back.

The quick distraction helped alleviate the already tense situation. The group did manage to go ahead and go out on the town without the man of honor. Unfortunately the man of honor had given them cold shoulder one too many times.



At 5:30 Craig was still stuck on the Long Island Expressway, not an uncommon event. He waited and looked around at the other cars surrounding him. All the people looked so oblivious to all the crud around them. None of them knew what an evil world was out there. Like many of his fellow officers, Craig was going to raise his family as far away from the NYC shit pile as he could.

Glancing out the car's window, he saw the body of a dead cat on the side of the road. Half its guts were hanging out of its mouth. Flies were feasting on the remains. Up to now there were only two thoughts in his head: getting home to Meredith, and how did they get that limo upstate? For the life of him he couldn't fathom why he didn't think of it before when he found it. Was he so obsessed with nailing Gercio that he didn't care how he was taken care of? He had seen some sick shit over the years; body parts sent UPS, bodies nailed to front doors. There was even the head of Juan Salicear found in a sealed bag of manure. Gangsters went to great lengths not to merely kill a man, but prove a point in how it was done. To think that someone would go through such great lengths meant that a very big point was being made.

But to whom?

Gercio was the top man. All the others fell in line behind him. As a matter of fact, he kept such a tight hold that *no one* dared challenge him.

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Marcella.

Gercio's only child was his daughter Marcella Zimmer. The gist of most insiders was that she was an insane daddy's girl. She always got what she wanted from him. Every jaw dropped in the precinct when they found out she married a Jew. Never in a million years did anyone think the goddaughter would be permitted to marry a non-Catholic, much less a nice Jewish boy. Wills must have clashed with her dad, and she had won. Now that Daddy was dead, maybe she might actually take his place.

Never.

No, women didn't belong to the mob, let alone run it. Only someone insane, soulless, and ruthless could ascend. Then it dawned on him, Marcella fit all of the above.

The traffic started to move again. From the corner of his eye, Craig saw movement. Just as he let the car begin to roll forward, he looked back at the dead cat. A large seagull had it in its grasp and was trying to fly off with it.

God, get me to retirement.

•

At 6:15 Craig pulled into the driveway of the house they called home, a three-story gray Victorian, with a wrap-around porch. He rented the entire bottom floor from the ever-smoking Julie Snow. If he could retire at the young age of forty-one, Mrs. Snow said she would consider selling him the whole house. Already he and Meredith had free reign of the

tremendous yard, and Mrs. Snow and her mother were like a built in Aunt and Grandmother for Meredith. The daughter, Jennine, helping out was just icing on the cake. No matter how bad things got at work, Craig was truly happy with his home life. Unlike everyone else he knew, Craig also had the ability to leave his work back in the City at the end of the day. Only in the wee hours of the morning did it begin to seep back into his brain. Nothing, but nothing, was going to violate his perfect home life.

The sun's rays felt warm and soft as they caressed Craig's bare face as he exited the car. He had been teleported safely back to wonderland. Meredith sat cross-legged on the back patio picnic table, busy taking something apart. Up on the porch, eighty-something year-old Mrs. McIlvain, sat rocking in her chair reading the *National Inquirer*. Her Inquiring mind wanted to know things. Like always, a can of Tab sat next to her with a half-full glass. "You should never drink from a can," was her sentiment. "It's not proper."

"Evening, Mom," Craig called to her while taking off his jacket.

"Evening Detective," she smiled back. "Solve any mysteries today?"

To this day, Craig still loved being called Detective. It gave him a hard-on, even from his adopted grandmother, yet he'd never admit it.

"As a matter of fact, I did. Any more alien sightings?" he inquired, pointing to the paper.

"Just up in the Catskills again. They've been getting a lot

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of them lately," she replied matter-of-factly, peering over the paper.

"Hum, have they abducted any mobsters?"

"No, no monsters."

Craig laughed and went to Meredith sitting on the table.

"No 'hello' young lady? Been waiting that long?" he asked, releasing the tie from his neck.

She looked up with a smile. All memories of the ferry ride were put aside in her child's mind for another time.

"Hi, Daddy. I'm working on my science project for camp."

On the table, in front of her knees, were two gray furry pellets. In her hands were the remains of a third.

"You'd rather destroy lint balls than kiss me?" he asked, bending down to her face.

Meredith stopped and gave her dad a peck on the cheek.

"They're not lint balls, silly. They're owl pellets," she corrected him. In her hands she showed him not only a mound of fur, but also a half dozen tiny bones. A tiny skull looked back at him from her tiny palm.

"You see, owls eat the mice whole, but they can't digest the fur and bones. So they puke it up in one big pellet."

Before his eyes, Craig saw an exact miniature of what he'd seen upstate. He took one of the remaining pellets and sniffed it. No odor at all.

"We're out of glue. I need to stick the bones back together on paper tonight. Can you get some?"

The request fell on deaf ears. Unable to control his

thoughts, Craig felt in his gut that somehow Gercio had met the same fate as the mice. But that was impossible. No way could anyone mimic something like this—not on this scale—especially the dumb shits in the families. There had to be a meaning. Yeah, as ridiculous as it was to try and fathom, Gercio and his limo were eaten and then puked up in the world's largest owl pellet.

"No way!" he told himself out loud.

"But, Daddy?" Meredith cried, " I *need* glue, tape won't work!"

Craig's thoughts instantly went back to his child.

"Oh, not that, darling. I'll get some glue when I go get the pizza."

"Great! But don't get that crappy stuff Mrs. Snow gets."

"Meredith Ann!"

"Well she always lends me the cheap glue, and it's not the same!"

"That's not what I mean!"

"Oh, 'crappy' is a bad word?"

"Yes. Where did you hear it?"

"The beach, Uncle Chip's, Aunt Aisha's, but mostly Mrs. Snow."

Craig shook his head. Sometimes he thought he was the last adult on the planet that didn't curse in front of children.

"Well, it's a bad word, and I don't want to hear it. Now if you go inside and order the pizza, we could eat in half an hour."

"Okay, but don't forget, you promised to play monopoly

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with me.”

“Of course. But after you’re done with the remains, um, pellets.”

“Okay, José.”

Craig started to help his daughter off the table, only to have her hop off and dash toward the door. On the porch, Mrs. McIlvain was gone, along with her paper. A warm summer breeze was the only thing keeping Craig company. The rustle of the leaves in the trees above had a soothing affect on his body. He wanted to just lie in the soft grass on the lawn and stare at the clouds. In the wind, he could hear a high pitch sound, a very familiar sound, of the engine of Mrs. Snow’s ‘62 Chevy. It wasn’t a piercing sound, just one so familiar that he could always tune into it. In the back of his head he always wondered how far away she could be and still pick up the sound of that one rocker arm off kilter. Timing it perfectly, he turned around to see the immense battle green car pull into the driveway beside his. It was the same familiar sight: a cigarette perched in her upper lip as her hands grabbed over each other, turning the hula hoop-sized steering wheel.

She must have the arms of a truck driver to steer that thing. Lord knows she had the mouth.

Julie Snow was from the old country, Brooklyn. For as sweet as her mother was, Mrs. Snow took no crap from anybody. If it ever came to blows, even Aisha would be no match. But like Aisha, she’d make sure you were fed before she’d crack your head.

“Well look at what the tide washed in,” Mrs. Snow mut-

tered while lugging out two full bags of groceries.

"Good evening, madam. How was charm school today?"

"Watch it, bub."

"Can I give you a hand?"

"Nah, I got it." The cigarette bobbed up and down in her lip. "Heard about your friend Gercio on the news. I'm not gonna have any mob guy shooting the place up am I?"

Click, Craig's mind began to turn.

"What did you hear?" he asked once again letting the realities of his job seep in.

"That he disappeared last night and his skeleton was found up near Buffalo this morning." Mrs. Snow said, walking up to the door. "Sounds like you have some leaks in your department."

Craig felt the anxiety swell in his gut. This was going to get worse. Whoever took out Gercio made more of a mess than already existed. It was well known that he had it in for Craig, and the good people of the news ate it up. Nobody from the TV or the mob ever came by the house, but there might now be a *big* spotlight on him personally. Maybe he could get in a few hours of quality time with Meredith, but he knew the phone would be ringing soon.

It was who was on the other end that was the big surprise.

•

"Fucking Asshole! Fucking Asshole!" Marcella repeated over and over almost in a chant as she paced back and forth in

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her living room, each thud from her 250 pound body rocking the house to its foundation.

The place was swarming with her men—her father’s men the day before. The other bosses had been calling her all day to offer their condolences, and to assure her that they had nothing to do with whacking her dad. This fact she already knew. She was waiting to get Petey in her grasp and find out exactly what he saw. Things had gone completely crazy and she did not have the control she’d like. *Fucking Asshole* was involved somehow, she knew it and felt it. The entire day she tried to piece together the cluster fuck the night before. Even when she tried to take someone out that afternoon, it fucked up. *Fucking Asshole* fucked that up too! She heard a car pulling up the driveway. If they didn’t have Petey with them, she was going to fry all of their asses.

A loud rap came from the door. Since she threw everyone outside, she was even more pissed having to answer the door by herself. Swinging it open, Benny stood there alone as the others cringed. Fear shown in all their faces, something she always liked to see.

“Where is he?” she demanded.

“We can’t get to him. They keep moving him.”

Marcella spun on her heel and thundered back into her living room. Benny knew this meant to follow. Half the men gave the sign of the cross as he entered her lair.

“I want a meeting with Dad’s council!” she commanded in her tremendous pink silk robe.

“Mrs. Z., with all due respect, they’d never give you an

audience," Benny reminded her.

"They will after I find Petey," she said coldly. "As long as I can find him alone!"

"Scalici and Barlow gave strict orders and..."

Benny did a no-no—mentioning their names in her house. There weren't too many guys who could intimidate Benny, but this hulking monster in pink sent a chill straight down his spine, right out his asshole.

"All I need is to find out where he is," she said calmly. "Just tell me where he is. Unless *you* can tell me what happened to my father?"

"I have to tell ya, Marcella," he confessed, "this is the weirdest fucking thing I ever saw."

Marcella went right up to his face. "You haven't seen nuttin' yet."

"Mommy!" Georgy's voice called from upstairs, turning Marcella's demeanor to something almost soft.

"In a minute dear, mommy's busy." She turned to Benny, "Find Petey, or I'll cut your balls off."

"Yes Mrs. Z."

"And keep an eye on my husband. Whoever did this may try to do the same to him," she added as she marched to the stairs. "Mommy's coming sweetie."

•

By 8:30, Craig and Meredith had reduced their pizza to a few remnants of crust. As Meredith finished gluing her ar-

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cheological finds to powder blue construction paper, Craig checked in with the precinct. He'd left specific orders on how to keep Petey out of view of his cohorts. The officer on the phone busted his chops about not going out with the rest of the boys; Craig quickly lectured him about parental responsibilities. It seemed Petey was terrified and actually wanted to be flown out of the country. Craig didn't feel sorry for Petey; anyone who willingly led a life where you kill innocent people deserved to be terrified. Still, Petey could give them all the information they needed to bust up all of the Gercio family and others.

Craig hung up the phone and wondered how long it was going to be before someone would call. If there was anything to do with the Gercios, a news reporter would eventually get to him. Never at home though.

"Meredith, why don't you get the Monopoly board?" he asked her.

"Sure thing!" She jumped up and ran to her room.

Curiously, Craig walked over to her project. Three tiny mouse skeletons were glued to the paper with surgical precision.

She's going to be an Orthopedist.

Laughing out loud, the thought that a giant owl ate Gercio and his limo was hilarious. There must have been something in his past and going on in the mob to have them do this. The style of his death meant something to someone.

I hope.

The phone rang and almost caused his heart to explode.

Drew Henriksen

They've found me.

Craig answered, hoping it would be Aisha or Chip.
"Hello."

"Craig?" a woman's voice asked.

Craig's racing heart stopped dead.

"Trisha?" he asked, knowing who it was.

"How's Meredith?"

"Um, fine. You missed her birthday."

"I know. I was in China believe it or not. I forgot."

"Your mother sent her a gift, again. But I think Meredith's getting wise to it," he said with the hair rising up on the back of his neck. "Why are you calling?"

"I wanted to talk to you, actually."

For a moment, Craig felt bad. He figured she must have seen some news reports and pieced things together.

"I'm sorry, thanks for calling," he apologized.

"I saw the news up in Hartford and came down immediately."

"Thank you. I wish it was under other circumstances."

"Oh the circumstances are perfect, I'm suing you for custody."

•

Tanya and Jerry rode the special patrol that night. Fresh out of the uniform and in plain clothes OCCB (organized crime control bureau), Tanya was all of 105 pounds. Jerry, on the other hand, was a seasoned veteran at the ripe old age of

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thirty-four. He was pissed when he learned he was getting a female rookie. He wanted a photocopy of himself, or of his retired partner, Henry. Instead, he got one of the city's attempts to make all things happy and politically correct. No scoping out babes with this one in the car. No bar hopping and tailgate parties with her! Oh no, he had to be the sucker "Poster Partner."

Both Craig and Aisha asked them for this special favor. The way the department worked, they could get away with it. In the back seat, wearing a fake black Afro wig, sat Petey, as the OCCB officers took him on an all-expense paid tour of Manhattan. It was Aisha's idea for the wig. Their orders were to drive around the entire shift, then meet up with Chip in Jamaica. Since Jerry was the senior officer, rock music was to be blasted until midnight. After that Tanya would get to blast disco until dawn. Their mission was not just to protect Petey, but to make him as miserable as possible.

"Would you two little shits turn that crap down!" Petey protested from the back seat.

"Why, this is Led Zeppelin my good man. You have to hear it as if you're in the Garden to fully appreciate it!" Jerry explained turning it up even louder.

"You're all a bunch of freaks. Especially that Scalici ass-wipe!"

"And gunning people down in bagel shops is normal?" Tanya threw back, endearing herself to Jerry already.

"Look at you. At least cops used to be men! Fucking fags! Listening to that shit! Letting niggers and cunts on the force."

Drew Henriksen

With that, Jerry slammed on the brakes, stopping the car immediately. The momentum catapulted both Tanya and Petey forward. Without the benefit of a seat belt, Tanya slammed into the dash. If she hadn't brought her arm up, she would have cracked a rib for sure. On the other hand, Petey's face hit the screen partition at 30 mph. The Afro would have worked as a cushion if they were only going 10. His nose was pulverized as Jerry immediately sped down an ally, Led Zepelin still blasting.

"What are you doing?" Tanya yelled, as Jerry flew out the door and pulled Petey out of the car.

"What the fuck did you say?" Jerry yelled, throwing Petey down and making a fist.

"Jerry no!" Tanya screamed, running to stop him.

"What the fuck did you say?" Jerry repeated, his eyes bulging with rage.

"You and your cum hole are a bunch of fags and lesbos!" Petey snapped, in hopes Jerry would take the bait. He didn't mind getting hit, as long as he could get in one good shot of his own.

Tanya immediately got between them, spoiling Petey's plan.

"Stop it! We can already get in deep shit as it is. Don't make it worse." Tanya begged him. "He can't testify with a broken jaw."

"Oh, I don't have to break his jaw!" Jerry responded surging forward again.

Tanya shoved back and grabbed his jaw.

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“Go get a coffee for us! Take a walk around the corner and cool down!”

“I’m not leaving you alone with him!”

“What’s he gonna do? He can’t go anywhere! He’s stuck with us,” she reminded him.

Jerry retreated back to the street.

“Fuck you, you faggot pig!” Petey yelled, taunting.

Jerry stopped. Tanya didn’t know if she could stop him from attacking the star witness a second time. He looked down, shook his head in dismay and walked out to the street. Tanya turned around and kicked Petey hard in the gut.

“That’s for the ‘C’ word!” she yelled and kicked him again. “That’s for the ‘N’ word.”

“You bitch!” he sneered back.

Tanya turned off the music and the sound of the police radio took over.

“Now get back in the car and put your seat belt on.”

Petey looked at the blood on his hands from his nose and climbed back inside the car as Tanya slammed the door behind him. Suddenly she noticed how cold it was; they had apparently found a cold spot in an otherwise warm summer night.

Petey watched Tanya go to the street looking for Jerry. That was good. That crap they were listening to was now off, and he actually preferred the sound of the police radio. The same monotone woman’s voice would come on with a click, then a series of codes. Then it went silent.

Halla-fucking-luia!

It clicked on and the same woman's voice came out over the radio again.

"There you are Petey!" it spoke.

Immediately he thought it was Lick-Me and Dick-Me playing with the radio. But he could see her and she wasn't using her radio. Dick-Me's voice was too deep to sound like that.

"Did you honestly think you'd gotten away from me?"

"H...h...who are you?" Petey asked, looking around for someone nearby with a walkie-talkie.

"Don't bother looking around. I'm in the radio," the voice responded.

Petey reached for a door handle, but there was none.

"You can't get out. You're in the back of a police car," the voice said. The little green light on the radio stayed on as if to watch him.

"Get back here!" he yelled in Tanya's direction.

The radio laughed at him, a high pitched woman's laugh.

"You know, I don't like the "C" word either."

Petey couldn't talk as fear gripped his chest.

When Tanya returned to the unusually quiet car, she felt proud of herself for preventing Jerry from killing Petey. "You're lucky Petey, you ought to thank me—" She stopped cold.

Something white.

Through the darkness of the windshield, Tanya noticed something white in the back seat.

What the fuck?

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She stepped closer and saw Petey arched in the back seat, unmoving. Not knowing what to make of it, she walked up to the window for a closer look. In the back seat, Petey was frozen with his back arched and one hand clutching his throat. His other hand was hooked onto the mesh partition, actually bending it. Every hair visible on his body was pure white. From the thick crop on his head, to the five o'clock shadow, it was a brilliant white. She looked at his eyes, open wide and still. The pupils opened almost as much the irises. His face looked as it was made of wax and pulled back like a cartoon character screaming.

She stood there a good five minutes before Jerry returned with coffee for all three of them.



Chapter 3

THE BITCH IS BACK

In all the years Craig lived below her, Julie Snow never once heard a peep out of him. Craig's voice was now vibrating Hummels off her mantelpiece. After a good forty minutes, she went down to the apartment below. Knowing it was none of her business, she also knew that Craig would never survive without her support. She hesitated before knocking; the vulgarities out of Craig's mouth didn't waver a bit.

"Who the hell do you think you are anyway? No court in the world would give custody to an abandoning slut like you!"

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Craig's voice resonated, then paused for the response.

The door opened slowly and Meredith stood there with tears in her eyes. Julie Snow knew what was going on. Hell, the whole neighborhood knew at this point, but she asked the child anyway. "Honey, what's going on?"

"Mommy called. I think she wants custard." Meredith sniffed.

"Custard?" Julie scowled, knowing Meredith knew better.

"I think she wants me back."

"Listen, why don't you go upstairs and watch TV. Mom's in bed, and Jeannine is at a party."

"Okay. Can I watch HBO?" she asked, since her dad didn't believe in cable TV.

"Sure thing, just don't put on anything bad," she promptly instructed, knowing *The Way We Were* was the only thing on for the eightieth time.

Meredith went up the steps and Julie marched in. Craig was still yelling at the phone. Julie immediately got his attention and gave the sign to cut it out. Craig glared at her then muzzled the phone.

"What do you want?" Craig snapped.

"Shut your goddamn mouth! Your daughter's upstairs crying. If you haven't noticed, she gone!" Julie threw right back at him.

Craig quickly looked around, and then went back to the phone.

"I don't care who your father hired, you're not getting her!" He seethed in a more controlled voice. Again he looked

around for Meredith. Julie pointed upstairs.

"I don't have time to—" Craig stopped and winced. "Operator, I already have an important call... Yes, yes put her through... Aisha this is not... Oh shit!... What *happened?* ...Where are they now? ...Has anybody talked to them? ...I'll be right in. Trish, you still there? ...As you can hear...what do you mean you heard enough?" Craig said without breathing once.

A loud click was heard and the room went silent. Julie could not believe everything she just witnessed.

"Don't worry about Meredith. I'm sorry for butting in..." Julie began.

"God no, um, thanks," Craig answered, dazed. "I don't know what I'd do if it weren't for you?"

"Go clean up the shit that obviously hit the fan. Meredith will be fine." Then her curiosity grew. "If you don't mind me asking, what's going on?"

"Well, filthy rich ex-wife has decided to remarry and become a full time mother, and two rookie cops apparently scared my star witness to death," Craig blurted out with a neurotic smile.

"I'd say you're going to be putting in some overtime."

Craig pulled out his keys and unlocked the drawer under the phone.

"Do me a favor, if any lawyers or reporters come by the house, don't talk to them. Matter of fact, don't talk to anyone." He took his revolver out.

"Don't worry. Besides being gorgeous, I have brains too,"

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she quipped as Craig rushed out.

“You’re the best!” he yelled back.

•

When Craig and Meredith first began eating their pizza, Aisha got the first call. She never did get to leave the precinct that night. Hubby was home with the kids, and the boys in blue actually wanted to give her her due. She was not one for beer, yet anything with vodka was okay with her. One by one, many of her cohorts came up to her at Flannery’s and paid their respects. All of the ones who did so were the ones that did not care that she was black or a woman, the latter being the more threatening. She could pretty much tell who was racist and who wasn’t. Unfortunately, the good people didn’t want to rock the boat when a-holes like Devaney acted up.

Two months ago, even her “friends” would not have taken her out. Then again, anyone who expected almost 400 years of ignorance to evaporate in just a decade needed a good jolt of reality. It felt nice that these men were here to celebrate with her. She even felt comfortable in their presence. Chip was always a little cold, jealous that Craig was getting a new best friend. But even he started to lighten up a bit, which was good, because Craig was beginning to isolate himself from his coworkers. Unlike the movies, being the lone wolf in this job was not smart. You needed to run with the pack whether you liked it or not. Craig was beginning to run away. She knew she needed to have a talk with him.

The bar itself was comfortable now. When they first got there, Chip felt a definite chill in the air. Blaming it on the air conditioner at first, he later passed it off as psychological tension from Craig not being there. He and Craig had closed the place down many a time, and still showed up for work the next day. They made a lot of friends back then, thank God. He found those bonds that Craig forged was the only thing helping him now. Most people didn't realize that Craig was just being overprotective of his kid and not looking down on them.

Behind the bar, Decklin, who'd been bartending for cops since the 1940's, was holding up the phone scanning the crowd.

"Who they lookin' for Deck?" Chip called out, expecting a wife looking for a husband that promised to be home hours ago.

"Aye, who's Detective Barlow?" Decklin asked in his thick brogue.

"Oh, I think it's the black chick," Aisha called out, sending a roar of laughter from the boys.

Decklin frowned at first, then realized, and handed the phone over.

"Barlow here," Aisha answered.

From across the room, Chip saw her face lose all color.

"Where are they?" she asked.

With no one else noticing, Chip made his way over.

"I'll be right there," she said, tossing the phone back to Decklin.

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"What is it?" Chip asked, grabbing her shoulder.

"Just come with me. I don't know what to expect."

Perplexed, the two gave no goodbyes and ran out, with Devaney watching from across the street.

•

Craig reached the alleyway at 9:54 PM. By the grace of God there were no news reporters there. There were certain codes to be used on the radio so the press wouldn't pick it up on their scanners. On the other hand, there were more police cars on the scene than at the St. Patrick's parade, plus two EMS ambulances. The secret wouldn't be kept for long. Every single head turned and looked at him as he ran out of the car. A hundred sets of eyes glared down to his soul, and he felt every one of them.

"Any of our guys down?" rushed out of his mouth before he came to a full stop.

"Just the oil spot," someone called out, referring to Petey.

As Craig approached the patrol car, the paramedics were wheeling the gurney to the street. The large mound underneath the blanket was unmistakable. Petey.

"Aisha!" Craig called out.

"Back here," her voice answered away from the street.

"What the hell happened here?"

"Christ, I don't know! He got scared to death?"

"Heart attack?"

As the medics were passing, Aisha stopped them. "Pard'

me guys." She grabbed the blanket and pulled it back. Petey's snow white face stared back at her. All the officers standing around gossiping stopped as dead as Petey's lifeless body. It was the expression on his face that chilled everyone, including Craig.

"Holy Shit!" was the only thing Craig could say. "Are you sure it's him?"

"Right down to the white pubic hair," Aisha replied, pulling the blanket back farther.

"Holy Shit!"

"Is that all you are going to say?"

"Did someone try to whack him?"

"Nope. Apparently he got under Jerry's skin. Tanya made him take a walk and was left alone with him," Aisha explained as they wheeled Petey away.

"*Tanya* did this?" Craig asked in disbelief.

"Well, she left him in the car only two or three minutes. When she came back, he was whiter than Barry Manilow."

"What's the coroner saying? Why aren't they here?" Craig asked, looking around at the mayhem.

"They were here. They said heart attack. I think his face tells us how it happened."

"Where's Jerry and Tanya now? They okay?" This was the more important answer to Craig.

"Jerry's a little rattled, but Tanya's a little bit in shock. She's in the rig with some O-2. I put Jerry in the diner across the street."

"Anyone talk to them?" he asked.

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"Just me and Chip."

Over her shoulder he could see Tanya sitting in the back of the ambulance, wrapped in a blanket.

"Do me a favor, run blocker for me out here. I smell news turkeys on the way."

"Better them than internal."

Craig looked at the visual barbs being slung at him. Even the medics were giving him the evil eye.

"I don't know, I just don't have the feeling I'll have the backing I should," he said, taking note of the glares of his fellow officers.

"It's about time you caught on."

"They're this pissed because I wouldn't go out drinking with them?" He approached the ambulance.

"It's more than that."

"Great! They're worse than Trish!"

Aisha stopped dead her tracts. He had spoken the forbidden name.

"Hold on there, partner. What..."

"Yup, she was the one on the phone when you called. Excuse me if I start flipping out and shooting people."

Craig sped ahead leaving Aisha with one thought: *Holy Shit!*

•

Despite the warm summer temperature, Tanya was shivering in the back of the ambulance. Sitting on the bench, all she

wanted was a hot cup of chicken noodle soup. The medics tried to get her to lie down. To her that would have been too much of a final insult. She knew she wasn't going into shock, she was just cold, and summarily told them to leave her alone. She was grateful they listened and didn't try to pick her up.

"Hey tenderfoot, hear ya used too much bleach on Petey back there," Craig greeted her with a smile.

Tanya only knew Craig a short time, but already knew he had a gift to calm things. Shaking, she looked at his warm eyes looking back at her. Immediately the chill began to slip away.

"D-d-detective. I think I m-m-messed up," she stuttered, still feeling some of the cold.

"What'd ya do, show him a picture of Devaney in a thong?" he asked with a straight face.

Her muddled head was not capable of a snappy come back at that moment, so she gave him a smile. Climbing in the ambulance, Craig bumped his head on the padded door frame.

"Damn it! Fucking Oompa-Loompas built this."

He seated himself next to her and asked her to repeat everything that happened.

"And there was nothing else?" he asked.

"Nothin'," she said, looking at him with confusion in her eyes, then adding, "Well, one thing."

"What? Tell me everything."

"Do you think he could have frozen to death?" she blurted out. "I know what it looks like, but he looked so cold. I got a chill too. Like I walked into an ice box."

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"Froze to death? You don't even have air conditioning in those patrol cars."

All the chill was now gone from her body and she found herself able to chuckle.

"I'm sure they'll find out what happened after the autopsy," he reassured her. Then, looking around first, he leaned closer to her. She could feel the warmth of his body on her cheeks. The smell of pizza was still on his breath as he whispered. "If anybody asks, this was all my idea. I intimidated you into doing this."

Before she could even gasp and protest, he glared at her with those eyes of his. She knew he was right. He was much better adapted to fend off and attacks than she was.

"Yes sir," she agreed. "I never should have left him alone. If I hadn't your star witness would still be alive."

"Or whatever scared him to death could have scared you too."

Tanya shook her head. "How's Jerry?"

"He's fine, I'm going to check on him now."

•

Chip and Jerry sat alone in the diner. Even the counter boy knew not to stay in the room and went in the back, not eager to hear what was going on. All he knew was that they had fucked up big time, and he didn't want to be called as a witness.

Craig walked in the propped-open door and saw the oppo-

site of Tanya. Jerry was sweating profusely. His short-sleeved, pale blue shirt was now dark navy and dripping. He held a bag of ice cubes, now almost water, on his head as he sat in the first booth. Chip stood over him like a doting mother fearing the worst. His jacket was off, also showing huge sweat marks. The two men looked to Craig as if they were holding their breath for his arrival.

“Jesus, what did you do? Fly here?” Chip asked.

“Kirk gave me a lift. Tell me what happened? Any brass show yet?” Craig asked, already knowing the story, but more concerned how he was going to explain it all.

Chip replied, “No one big has wind of it yet. I was waiting for you to show before we cleaned house.”

Craig sat down in the booth across from Jerry, resting his arm in some dried sticky leftover on the tabletop.

Fucking great. It just keeps getting better and better.

Jerry let out a breath and told his version of the events. Just as Craig feared, no new light was shed on anything.

“I’m telling you, if I had played it cool with that grease ball, none of this would have happened,” Jerry growled, then slammed the booth with his hand.

“So you got a temper! We all do! You think you could have prevented this?”

“Damn straight!”

“You were going to stop a heart attack?” Craig threw out with just the right amount of sarcasm to let Jerry know that this was going to be the official version of events, and to let him know there was nothing that could have been done. Once

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again, Craig managed to calm the storm brewing in someone's head.

Jerry's anger immediately began to lessen. "But what the fuck scared him?"

Craig looked to Chip in a desperate attempt for an answer. Chip responded with an "I don't know" shrug.

"Maybe he thought of Marcella naked," Chip suggested. "Hell, I'd be shocked white from that."

Jerry smiled, noticing the gleam in Craig's eye.

"What is it, sir?" Jerry asked.

"Chip is right. You know how scared Petey was of Marcella. You know how he refused to stay in one place for more than twenty minutes. The way he insisted on being driven around all night with that wig on."

"I ditched the wig, sir," Jerry noted.

"Good! Anyway, you know how I told you to do this, even though it was against policy," Craig continued to coach.

"But the overtime was needed for your rent," Chip added with the same gleam.

Jerry picked up on everything.

"With that fat bitch after me, I could be scared to death, too," Jerry said, nodding.

"So would I," Chip agreed.

"And don't forget, I told you to do this," Craig said in conclusion.

"Actually, I'm the one that relayed..."

"No! I, and I alone, gave you the order to do this. Not Aisha, not Chip, it was me."

"But sir, I—"

"No buts! This is *my* wonderful mess," Craig insisted.

Jerry and Chip gave each other a glance and knew almost telepathically that this was how it was going to be. On top of everything else, they also knew Craig always got his way. They were both very happy he was their friend.

Craig pointed toward the ambulance outside. "Now go check on your partner."

Things seemed to be somewhat under control. It was then that Craig noticed Jerry's tattoo. Half the men in the precinct had them, but it was the eyes staring back at him that called his attention. On Jerry's ample bicep was a dragon. Its red eyes stared out from a long green body. Its long tail wrapped around his arm in a circle. In its jaws, being devoured, lay a smaller dragon's limp body, its eyes shut as blood dripped from his wounds.

"Nice tattoo, Jerry. A bit gruesome, don't ya think?" Craig commented, completely enamored by it.

"It's from when I was in the Army," Jerry explained. "My whole company got them. I think it intimidates the perps more."

"It intimidates me." Craig shook his head in awe, then turned his attention back on Jerry's face. "Look, if the news comes calling, wear long sleeves. Understand?"

"Sure thing, but I thought nothing intimidated you," Jerry replied, already self-consciously covering his tattoo with his hand.

"Wait 'til you meet my ex. Actually, maybe she was the

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one who scared Petey to death.”

All three laughed as Jerry got up and walked out to the ambulance. Putting his hat back on with confidence, all his self-doubt seemed to be gone.

“Man, you’re a work of art, friend.” Chip smiled. “You definitely have the golden tongue.”

“I’m going to need it, too. Besides this shit, she called me tonight.” Craig said all in one breath.

“No fucking way...” Chip knew who “she” was immediately.

“Yes, way. And on top of that, we never got a statement from Petey. Come on, let’s help Aisha clean up.” Craig laughed, grinning a toothy smile. “Maybe we can get it all done before Dr. Bellows and Mrs. Brady get here.”

•

Most of the cops were gone when the first news crew showed up. Their enormous van with its satellite dish always reminded Craig of a bad science-fiction prop, ready to shoot a death beam at network competition. The tow truck was pulling Jerry and Tanya’s patrol car away as the space van from channel hell parked in front of the diner. Petey’s body was already gone.

Thank God.

Trent Gold, field reporter, was out of the passenger’s seat before the driver could even put the van in park. Aisha was the first one who caught his eye. As the star-roving reporter,

he had already learned to always head for the female officer. They couldn't resist him. He had also learned to stay away from Craig, who had slipped over to the ambulance where Jerry and Tanya were.

"Excuse me, detective. Trent Gold, Live Action News. We understand there's been a break in the Gercio case." Trent thrust a mike in Aisha's face.

Aisha barely had time to inhale before she was doused in bright light and a camera lens.

"Um, no comment. Please refer all questions to DCPI," she instructed, tempted to go for her revolver instead.

Trent Gold Live Action News flung the mike back to his mouth. "Is it true that Peter Cusamano, a-k-a Big Petey, was going to testify against the Gercio crime family? And did he not suffer a fatal heart attack moments ago?"

"Again, please refer all questions to the Department Commission for Public Information," Aisha repeated, trying to look as professional as possible.

"Could he have been poisoned to silence his testimony?" Trent threw back, along with his mike.

"Again, Mr. Gold, no comments at this time."

By that time Craig had convinced the ambulance to pull away without its lights and sirens on.

"Detective, it's been this reporter's experience that 'no comment' is another way of stating 'cover-up.'"

"Again, please..." she spoke with the voice of exhaustion.

"Trent!" Craig's voice interrupted. "How are ya? Did you forget I'm the only one with DCPI clearance to talk about

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Gercio?"

Craig had doubled around the back of the Live Action News squad.

God Craig! Don't weird out on TV! Aisha was worried.

"Detective Scalici. Can you tell us what has taken place here?" Trent inquired twirling around to Craig.

"Rather than tell you, why don't we have a look? It's worth a thousand words. Right?" Craig asked with a straight face. Aisha could always recognize when Craig was keeping a straight face.

"Why yes, Detective, it certainly is," Trent replied.

From in the diner, Chip also saw the disaster in the making. It was like watching a car sliding on the ice. You could see the wreckage beforehand, but weren't able to do a damn thing about it. Craig was herding them over to the alley.

"Detective, how did you feel last week when Gercio openly threatened you?" Trent snuck in, as they were led to the alley.

"Now, now, he didn't openly threaten me personally. He said, 'That wonder bread wop was going to get it.' If he had specifically named me, I could have arrested him," he pointed out in his fake lawyer voice. "Now don't go putting words in his mouth. It's all right to glamorize him, but don't lie."

They reached the alley where the cameraman illuminated the dark corridor, revealing the trash and filth in the shadows.

"And what are we supposed to see, Detective?" Trent asked, beginning to realize he was playing into Craig's hands and knowing he had to see it through without looking like a

complete ass. If he had to, he'd have to embarrass the psychopath on film. Nobody would get away with mocking him on his own news show. He knew he shouldn't have gone live. But Channel Seven would be here in five minutes.

"Well it's not down there, Trent. Look up at the roof," Craig announced in his official police voice.

Before Trent could signal the cameraman not to go for it, he flung the light up to the top of the buildings.

"And what are we supposed to see? A diversion from the truth?" Trent tried to recover.

"No, a blimp. A big magical blimp with little monkey pilots." Again in all seriousness.

"What happened here detective?" Trent yelled while positioning his face for the camera.

Craig put his arm around Trent.

"I'm just joshing ya, Trent," Craig answered, then looked right into the lens. "We're old buddies, really."

Aisha just stood there. The near twenty-four hours that she had been up was now culminating to this. The odd thing was, Craig once again seemed to be getting control of the situation. She just hoped he wasn't having a nervous breakdown in the process.

Chip also had similar concerns, but saw an opportunity to get Craig away from them. He approached them. He did not want to be put on camera, but who knew what would come out of his mouth?

"Are you hiding the fact that your star witness was scared to death? That his hair was shocked white?" Trent boiled.

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"Scared white? You see folks, he such a card," Craig taunted sarcastically. "He's great. I think the national news should get him. Make sure you call and tell them to get Trent."

Trent realized his situation, but desperately didn't want to let it show that he was losing control. If he pressed the man any further, he could make matters worse.

"In all seriousness Trent, we cannot discuss things at this time. We will contact you and Live Action News as soon as possible."

"Detective!" Chip called out. "You're needed on the phone."

The camera turned, shining directly at Chip.

"Why thank you, Detective," Craig answered, then turned back to Trent. "I have to run. Duty calls."

Immediately Trent Gold turned his face to the camera and began to cover. "As you see folks, something as taken place here, and we will keep you informed as developments unfold. Now, back to Ned in the newsroom. Ned."

The Camera light turned off at the same time Trent's face knotted into a snarl. Looking up to the street, he saw all the police cars pulling away. Each one had an arm out, giving him the finger. He wanted to get that jerk so bad. By the diner, he saw the other two detectives climbing into a sedan. Standing beside it, he saw Scalici staring back at him. His eyes almost seemed to be glowing. He could see every detail of the irises as if he were standing face to face with him.

The world went silent in Trent's head. *He'd kill me if he*

could get away with it.

"Would you get in the car?" the woman detective scolded Scalici. Unflinching Craig continued to stare at Trent, then silently got in the car.

At first, the thought of revenge was ridiculous. But as the detectives' car drove away, so did Trent's fear of Scalici.

Time to dig, asshole.

•

To Craig's amazement, sleep came easily. With everything running through his mind, he thought he'd be wired for a week and a half. Foremost in his mind was whether or not to call home. It made more sense to stay at Chip's house in Brooklyn than drive back to Islip. He wanted desperately to call Mrs. Snow, but he figured there really was no need. He told Aisha to go home and not to come in until noon. Lord knows, she'd been up longer than he had.

It had been quite a while since he'd been to Chip's house. The last time was a christening, and he had forgotten which kid it was for. Something else to lament over. Chip put him up in the guest room and went off to bed himself. Craig hoped he got the chance to see Barbara in the morning. God, he almost forgot what she looked liked.

With all the thoughts mish-mashing in his brain, Craig no sooner shut his eyes than he went right to sleep. It was a very sound sleep.

Then he began to fly.

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He was first over Brooklyn, then headed north across the sound. Little by little the buildings below began to give way to trees. The air flowing around him was warm, like bathwater that was just right. Looking down, the trees below slowly went from leafy hardwoods to tall pine trees. He began to climb higher in the sky. Facing the moon, he looked at his hands and arms in the light. To him his skin still looked as if it was that of a child. Pale and white, he could see all his birthmarks that he had growing up, the unique little blemishes that stayed with him like long lost brothers and sisters.

He thought about Jerry's tattoo, the dragon. He remembered its shape and the smaller dragon being devoured. The larger dragon's claws were gnarled and twisted and ready to shred its prey. Craig looked down at his own body. Without being startled or phased in the least, he saw that he himself was in the grasp of a giant claw. Completely unaware of it until that moment, it felt more like being held by a blankets.

Of course, it's a dream.

On either side of him he could see the massive leathern wings gracefully drift down then up like they were floating in water. He couldn't see its head, or turn to see the back. But he knew what would be there, a huge head and long tail, just like on the tattoo.

Yet different.

This was a female—a female dragon flying with him, carrying him high into the sky. Passing clouds, he felt a soft arousal in his gut, something he never felt for Trish. The claw around him suddenly tightened as if she didn't even want him

Drew Henriksen

to think of Trish. He did anyway. He thought about how he had never loved her, and how they only married because she got pregnant.

The grip loosened a bit.

Can you read my mind? He asked with his thoughts.

No. She answered back gently with hers.

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