

CHAPTER 1

Clarissa Louise Samuels-Hewitt—Claire—came into my life wrapped in tragedy.

It was September, and I was doing my stint in Narcotics over in Homestead, Pittsburgh. We got a call about a domestic disturbance two or three doors down from where we had just grabbed Trevor “Razor” Washington for possession of heroin with intent to distribute.

Normally Razor wasn’t prone to making mistakes, but this week, after picking up the stash, he decided to stop off at one of his girls’ houses for a Friday-night quickie. Rookie mistake, the kind that a pro only makes when he’s blinded by the beaver store: he left the stash in plain sight on the passenger seat. Didn’t even need to wake up Judge Scanlon for a warrant. I grabbed the Louisville slugger from my trunk and started whaling on the hood of Razor’s car, setting off the Viper alarm.

He came out the front door, pants around his knees and gun in hand, took one look at me, and knew he was fucked. The department would bitch at me for damaging personal property, but now we could add a weapons charge to Razor as well.

My partner, Marco Escardo, carried a tiny Beretta .22 as his backup piece. We often referred to it as the Bette Davis purse gun. He stepped out of Razor’s blind spot beside the doorframe and brought the dainty .22 up behind Razor’s left ear.

“We have drugs, weapons, and now we have you approaching a Pittsburgh City Narcotics sergeant in the course of his duties with what is likely a loaded and stolen firearm used in multiple felonies. This is more than enough for a self-defense righteous kill. Drop the piece, Razor, if you ever want to smell pussy again.”

“The main pussy I’ll be whiffing is that fat, ugly spic wife of yours when I post bail tonight, you little narc bitch! Speaking of

pussy, where's you get that sissy-ass gun? You been rolling fags on Liberty again, huh!"

Now, Marco Escardo was as cool and collected as they come. Methodical, never prone to unnecessary violence, and far too established on the moral high ground to pistol-whip a high-prize drug suspect. But Razor was still holding the Desert Eagle .50 cal pistol in his right hand, so Marco Escardo was well within his rights to do what he did next.

Keeping the small Beretta on Razor's head, Marco reached with his right hand for the square, black plastic box on his holster belt. He brought the business end of the taser to the back of Razor's boxers, applied the trigger, and launched the twin prongs at their target. The heat and intensity of the prongs made quick work through Razor's tattered underwear, one prong lodging firmly in his sphincter, the other clipping to the base of his rather well-endowed scrotum.

The twenty-eight-year-old self-proclaimed "Prince of Pittsburgh's Drug Scene" soiled himself and pitched forward against the wrought iron porch rails, breaking his nose and biting off the front half inch of his tongue. He twitched and spasmed for a good twenty seconds before Marco turned off the taser.

I looked at Marco with a wry grin. "He's going in *your* car."

Marco became an honorary Spenser brother at age eleven when my eldest brother, Kenny, spared him a sentence in juvenile hall for trying to boost the tires off Kenny's squad car. We figured it had been some petty hood initiation meant to go sideways. No way was tiny eleven-year-old Marco making off with four police cruiser tires on foot. Homeless before then, he became my mother's ward of the courts.

Our grandfather coached him into a flyweight boxer, and Marco graduated salutatorian of Shady Side Academy (our half sister Francine was valedictorian his year). After three years of a perfect boxing record at Carnegie Mellon, he could rise no further

than a club competitor, so he headed down to the Federal Law Enforcement Training Center at Glynco and did three years with Homeland Security as a counter-narcotics expert. Afterward, he came back home to Pitt and did the transfer paperwork to the Street Narcotics Unit (SNU) team, also known as the PPD Counter-Narcotics Division, and had been in the shotgun seat as my partner ever since.

Marco slapped a cuff on Razor's wrist and attached the other one to the porch rail. He pulled on a rubber glove—like all good narcs keep in their pockets—and swept Razor's mouth clear of his amputated tongue tip, then gently laid his head so that Razor wouldn't choke on what remained of his tongue, the coagulating blood, or the contents of his stomach, which some tasing recipients bring back up. Marco gingerly picked up the Desert Eagle and checked the chamber.

"Safety was off, Tommy. He had a full mag and one locked and ready. If he squeezed off a shot, we could have him on attempted murder." Marco stood up in the doorframe and sighted the Eagle to the fender of Razor's car where I had been standing a minute ago. I could see my partner's thoughts: squeeze the trigger, no eyewitnesses to the scuffle and shot, just noise at two in the morning. And years of future arrests and paperwork and plain simple energy saved by locking this piece of shit up on attempted murder.

"Don't even think about it. Bag the gun. I'm not gonna give a guy thirty years for insulting your wife, Escardo. If someone were fucking up your car, you'd come to the door with your pistol in your hand, too."

Escardo shrugged, laid the pistol and clip on the hood of Razor's Escalade, and peered inside where my slugger had made a mess of the passenger window. He pulled out a gallon-size baggie stuffed with vials and gel caps. We both quietly nodded in admiration of our catch, at the same time wondering how the

fuck Razor was so clouded by a piece of ass that a pro like him wouldn't deliver the stash first.

"Looks like a week's supply, Tommy. DA is gonna love you."

"Meh, his lawyers will say he was set up by a rival. Unless we pull his prints off the bag. Fuck, wouldn't be surprised if he tried to argue that *we* planted it."

Marco opened the door of the Escalade and reached under the seat. He came up with a fat manila envelope, one of those US-letter-size jobs that my ex's lawyers used to send telling me how much I paid in child support for the privilege of being a two-weekend-a-month father. But this envelope wasn't stuffed with paper. It was bulging with money.

"Tommy, why the fuck would he hide the money and set the stash where everyone could see it?"

"Detective Escardo, if you have learned anything in your five years with me, it is that whether or not Mr. Razor was so blinded by a piece of West Mifflin ass that he forgot his custodial duties or some homie put a tip out and set him up is irrelevant. What is relevant is we have a gallon of gel caps that will never make their way into the street. And that, my friend, is what us Irish Jew boys call a good day."

Escardo drew out a gravity knife (a slightly more legal version of a switchblade) and slit the end of the package open. Even in the piss-poor Pittsburgh fall weather you could smell the money on the air. Eighty thousand easily, in fifties and hundreds. I put on my gloves and grabbed a clear plastic evidence bag from the back of our unmarked Crown Victoria cruiser. Into it went the Desert Eagle, the stash, and the money. Escardo slipped the full mag of bullets, in a much smaller bag, into his back pocket. Ammunition was handled slightly differently; we would do a test fire of Razor's pistol to not only see if it had been used in any unsolved murders but also to determine if he had been stupid

enough to keep the same batch of bullets that produced the kill shot. I slammed the trunk and locked it and heard Escardo on the radio with EMS.

“Central, this is Twelve-Echo-Three. Need a black-and-white and EMS at 410 Diller Avenue. Possession of narcotics with intent to distribute, possession of a firearm while on probation, resisting arrest and . . .” He paused, looking at the growing reservoir of filth in what had once been Razor’s underwear. “. . . indecent exposure. Roger, I’ll be on the porch.”

“Twelve-Echo-Three, this is Central. We just got a possible domestic battery call from 416 Diller. Can you or Spenser check on it till the patrolman gets there?”

“I got it,” I said. Escardo had already had his cowboy moment of the night, and while both of us loathed wife beaters, Marco worried me more. After his getting fired up with Razor, the Joe Dirtbag husband of house 416 might be the recipient of a few broken ribs and internal bleeding. Two-in-the-morning domestic disturbances, even in Homestead, was usually white trash getting slap-happy with the missus after knocking off a six-pack of Iron City. This sad fact of Pittsburgh family life was something I’d known since I was three years old.

It was a risk to go it alone, but a calculated one. I seriously doubted that two residents of Diller Avenue were going to confront us with firearms within minutes of each other. Besides, if something crazy happened, Marco was thirty meters away, sitting on an unconscious dealer.

I crossed three lawns and rapped my gold shield badge against the screen door, holding it high to the window, although I doubted the residents thought I was a Jehovah’s Witness—I wasn’t dressed well enough.

“Open up! Pittsburgh police!”

The husband answered. Insolent, arrogant, cocky, and—like

every asshole in the world who was taller than me—pissed off that the cop coming for him wasn't Tom Brady with a badge or some shit.

"Take a walk, sir. I have enough probable cause to take you in for assault, but I won't tonight because, fortunately for you, we just nailed one of the biggest shitbird narcotics cases in Homestead. I need thirty minutes to talk to your wife. Take a walk. *Now*. And leave your car keys with me. Call some asshole buddy from work to pick you up and give you a couch, or I'm on the phone to Central right now."

The arrogant look on his face faded to shock, then amusement, then meek borderline gratitude that he wouldn't be spending the night in holding next to the dealers, pimps, and other common scumbags. Even wife beaters think they have moral superiority to people like that; they consider their crimes a slightly smudged version of a white-collar offense.

He handed me the keys, grabbed his jacket, and walked off without another word. I reckoned in about six hours he would be back with coffee and probably flowers, begging her to give him another chance, saying how it was wrong of her to get him so upset. I was five years old again, watching my dad tell my mom that he was a changed man and this really was the last time: he was going to get some help.

Wife beaters are so fucking cliché, no matter what generation.

I gently shut the door, then sat down across from the wife. I probably should have waited for another uniform, but I wasn't gonna pull Escardo off babysitting our biggest bust in months.

"My name is Sergeant Tommy Spenser, Pittsburgh Narcotics. I was making a bust down the block when your 911 call came over my radio. Do you need to go to a hospital? You have quite a shiner there."

She sat wrapped up in a turquoise robe, trembling. The first thing I noticed was that she was very pretty. Not Hollywood-model-vogue-glitzy pretty, but pretty. Her hair was long, past

her shoulders, wavy and auburn, spiraling into curls at the bottom. She had lovely eyes, teal green, and even though they were shrink-wrapped in tears, I saw gentleness in them. Her cheeks were tracked with pink streaks where her tears had been running. Her mouth was clenched as if she were holding back shouting or screaming.

From the pictures on the wall, I could tell she had a lovely smile. But now a red-and-blue starburst was starting at the edge of her left eye socket. Her jawline and bone structure looked so tender and frail that a closed-fist punch by the bastard might very well have shattered the socket bone. So, despite being a sonofabitch, either he pulled his punch or he slapped her open handed. There are varying degrees of bastards, I suppose. Above her upper lip was a wine-colored speck of a birthmark, no bigger than the crescent moon on a fingernail, and I studied that slight discoloration in order to avoid staring at the swelling already forming around her eye. Everything about her looked delicate. She weighed maybe 105 pounds if she weighed an ounce.

“Nice to meet you. My name is Clarissa Samuels . . . erm . . . Hewitt. My maiden name is Samuels.”

Her hands were bony and tiny and did not resist as I took one of them in both of mine.

“Mrs. Hewitt—”

“Mrs. Hewitt? It’s 3 a.m. and I’m in my pajamas. You don’t have to be so formal.”

“Well, what would you like me to call you, then? Do you have a nickname? Do you go by Clarissa?”

She smiled wryly through her tears. “Nobody’s called me Clarissa since I was five years old.” Her eyes met mine for a second, then looked away as a tear spilled down one cheek. “You can call me Claire.”

“Okay. Claire it is. Do you have somewhere to go for the next twenty-four hours?”

The tears welled up again and fell freely like a waterfall. “No.”

“Do you want to press charges?”

She wiped a gob of tears and snot with the sleeve of her robe.

“No.”

“Do you want me to get someone from social services out here, a counselor, someone to talk to?”

“At three in the morning? I don’t think so.”

“Mrs. Hewitt—Claire—your husband is a lot bigger than you, and it’s obvious he is quick with his temper. I don’t want one of my uniforms calling me in a month and saying you’re dead. If you don’t want to press charges, and you don’t want to give a statement, and you don’t want to go to a hospital . . . let me just get you out of here for a day or so. Maybe you both get your heads a little straight.”

“Sergeant, you just said you’re a narcotics cop. This is way below your pay grade. What do you care? Shouldn’t there be some twenty-one-year-old uniform fresh out of the academy with shaving cuts writing all this down?”

That wasn’t a good sign. She had been around the block with this asshole and the police, enough to have grown rather cynical. I didn’t have a quick or witty retort. I looked again at the pictures on the wall. My training flashed through my mind, and I could almost kick my own ass: I hadn’t thought of clearing the house first.

“Anyone else here I should know about? Do you have any kids?”

“No.” She trembled a little more at that. “I don’t want to bring a child into this.”

“Well, there’s got to be family or friends we can reach out to. There’s got to be someone out there who loves you and doesn’t want you in the middle of this. I’m gonna call up one of our female detectives. Why don’t you go get changed, and I’ll take you to

meet her? Meanwhile, on the drive you can think of someone we can bring you to for a couple nights' rest."

She nodded weakly, almost defeated by the conversation. I watched as she started down the hallway to her bedroom and noticed her trailing small red droplets. She froze, ran her hand down to her waist, and turned around, whiter than a three-day-old corpse in the river. Her fingers came out of her pajama bottoms covered in blood. I caught her right before she collapsed against the wall, and rested her head in my lap. Her pelvic area was slick and sticky with dark blood.

My first thought was that the bastard had raped her, but there had been no overt signs of a struggle in the house, and I saw from the hallway that the bed was still neatly made. I punched 911 in my phone, identified myself, and told them I had been answering a domestic dispute and the victim had passed out and was now expelling blood heavily from her vaginal area. Her pulse was shallow but steady.

I had the bottom half of her robe as well as my suit jacket pressed up against her groin. Her forehead was scalding. I let go for ten seconds to soak a washcloth from the kitchen sink and press it against her forehead.

Kim, the same EMT who had been patching up Razor two houses away, came through the door with her med kit. "Jesus, Tommy, what happened?"

She shed the gloves she had been using and put on a fresh pair. Grabbing a set of shears from her belt, with deliberate precision she cut away the bottom half of Claire's robe and pajamas. Out of modesty I looked away. Kim glanced up at me and rolled her eyes at my decorum. "Snap out of it, Sergeant Spenser. I need a pillow and towels. Get all the lights on you can."

I was only too eager to help. I stepped around them, yanked a pillow off the bed, flung open doors until I found the linen closet

and grabbed four or five towels, then ran back down the short hallway. I propped the pillow under Claire's head and helped Kim stuff the sheets under her legs, then flushed with embarrassment again as we bent her knees as if she were in an exam room at the OB-GYN.

Kim said, "Spontaneous miscarriage, Tommy. From the bits of tissue, I'm judging she was maybe two months along. Fucker must have punched her in the gut; I'm palpating at least two cracked ribs. Tell Bobby to bring me lots of saline. I'm gonna have to flush her out on-site to make sure she doesn't go septic on us."

"I . . . I don't think she knew. That she was pregnant, I mean."

"Why didn't you cuff the bastard, Tommy?"

"Fuck you, Kim. I was trying to de-escalate the situation. I figured telling the guy to take a hike and getting some breathing room between them was best." Claire had been sitting on the couch, and he opened the door willingly. *How could I have known what happened?*

"That's why you wear the gold shield, Tom. You're supposed to know better."

I tried to keep from retching as Kim's gloved hand reached in with businesslike accuracy and cleared blood clots and God knows what else from that mess.

"Well, now it's gone from a domestic dispute to aggravated assault." She turned back to Claire Hewitt. "Pretty little thing, too. You poor girl. We'll patch you up." Kim turned back and without looking directly in my eyes said, "Have Bobby bring the bus over in the driveway and get the gurney ready. She's lost quite a bit of blood. She needs an IV and probably antibiotics."

"Where's the uniformed patrol I already called for?"

"Came across a fender bender on the way over here. He's writing a citation over on the bridge. Marco's flying solo to take your boy in to booking."

I backed out of the house to see Bobby's flashing lights from

the ambulance already in the driveway. He shouldered past me with a Skedco, as the door was a bit too narrow to bring a full-size wheeled gurney through. A Skedco is a sturdy, plastic, durable brace that rolls up almost like a beach towel and can be used as both a stabilization board and a jury-rigged stretcher, known for its use on the battlefield but getting more and more popular with urban EMS and SWAT teams. Once we had the fluids and lines going and had Claire secured, we three hefted her up and brought her outside. The EMTs got Mrs. Hewitt buckled on the gurney outside the front door, and Bobby looked at me.

“Are you hit, Sarge?”

“No, why?” I looked down. Both my forearms and my waist were covered in her blood. I grabbed up a few of the towels and wiped down as best I could. Marco was already on the way to the station with Razor, so being without wheels or a change of clothes, I jumped into the back of the ambulance and held Mrs. Hewitt’s hand, wondering why the hell anyone who considered themselves a man would hit a woman.



The sunlight streaked through the windows of UPMC Hospital. It was 5:15 in the evening on Saturday, but the sky was still clear—that point of the day where it goes from blue to reds and yellows to dark. I had fallen asleep in a chair next to Claire and had one hand resting on the thumb break of my .45’s holster. (Like her asshole husband was gonna do a frontal assault past the nurse’s station; I’d seen too many movies.)

The EMTs had scrounged up a pair of blue flight coveralls for me to put on, and my sharp gray suit—well, as sharp as you could get off the thrift store shelves—had found its way to the incinerator of the hospital’s custodial department. I took a shower shortly after I knew she was stable. I was on the butt

end of nine days of duty; I had three days off coming up, and I didn't have the kids visiting. *What harm could it do to keep her company?*

More heightened than the physical trauma of the miscarriage was Claire's emotional distress. Sometime during my near-comatose state after the night's activities, the on-duty hospital shrink had come in and talked to Mrs. Hewitt about her late child's brief residency in her womb. The double shock of not knowing she had been pregnant and thusly miscarried had put her into a frenzy of grief and outrage, and the shrink had judiciously put her on a cocktail of painkillers, sleep agents, and antianxiety meds. The stash in Razor's car couldn't have done a better job of propelling her into euphoric bliss.

I heard a familiar voice from the doorway.

"Prince Valiant, the noble knight at it again, I see. Oh, nice overalls there, cutie!"

I looked into the eyes of the hospital's chief trauma nurse, Samantha Knight Callahan, RN, MSN, DNP—former married name of Spenser. Samantha usually worked shifts at St. Clair, which was closer to the house she shared with her new husband. But she moonlighted at UPMC when the chief nurse was sick or called away. I managed a small smile for the mother of my kids.

"Need I mention the irony of the caduceus and that 'cowboy cock' of a .45 in the shoulder holster going well together?" She pursed her lips into a sarcastic smile. Even in medical scrubs after a double shift, my ex-wife still looked fabulous.

I stood up, adjusted the EMT flight-suit coveralls as if they were a dinner jacket, and planted a perfunctory kiss on her cheek. "How are you, gorgeous?"

"I knew you didn't have much of a social life, but really, Tommy? Picking up chicks in the ER?"

"Hardee-har. She was part of a domestic dispute next door to a bust."

“I heard about that. I just got done watching an intern stitch up”—she consulted the clipboard in her hand—“Trevor Washington, a.k.a. Razor. Was that yours or Marco’s work?”

“He had a gun drawn. Marco tasered him from behind. He fell where he fell.”

“He was cuffed to a chair in the ER waiting room half the night, howling for his lawyer. Cussing you and Escardo and every other honky cop on the planet.”

“Escardo is a Latino.”

“I guess he was generalizing. Anyways, he needed about thirty stitches from where his face hit the rail. You gave him a true gangster scar. You probably even upped his street cred.”

“Why’d he wait so long?”

“Well, he was ambulatory coming in, and it was a busy night. Plus,” she added with a small laugh, “you don’t piss off my nurses if you want five-star care.”

She hugged me around my shoulders from behind. Not a loving, romantic hug like we once shared but one of those hugs a friend, even an ex-wife, gives you when they know you’ve caught hell that day. Resting her chin on my shoulder, she looked down at the broken, battered, and doped-up shell of Clarissa Hewitt resting peacefully in bed.

“And this one?” she said. Samantha hadn’t handled her. Kim’s call over the net had brought in not one but three off-duty OB-GYNs—God bless them—wanting to help at 3 a.m. on a Saturday. She had gone straight past the ER bullpen and into surgery. A simple D&C, but they went ahead and did a small exploratory incision and scope to see if the bastard had caused any internal damage. Claire Hewitt wouldn’t have gotten better treatment if she were a visiting UN ambassador’s wife.

I wondered bitterly if the fact that a Spenser had picked up this girl had triggered an outpouring of attention. My father’s name still opened a lot of doors when it came to cops. For once

I was grateful for my father's notoriety, currency normally used up on expensive dinners, expensive hookers, and bar tabs for his former partners.

"Fucking husband smacked her around. Gut-punched her so hard she lost the kid. Kim found a few cracked ribs when we were bringing her in too. X-rays showed mass contusions on her back, so this wasn't the first time he was free with his fists. And I let the sonofabitch go."

She gave me one last squeeze before backing away. "You sent him away because you were protecting her. I know you, Tommy."

"The bastard didn't resist at all, so I thought the sooner I got him out of the house, the sooner I could get her story. Marco was sitting on Razor, waiting for the unis to show up," I said, referring to uniformed officers. "Such a fucking rookie mistake. She was sitting there on the couch, the house was neat, and . . . I couldn't tell what had happened. I let that maggot walk out the door."

"Okay, hotshot, so say you *didn't* send him out of the house. Say you turned your back to him, and the next thing you know, there's a kitchen knife in your heart and they're handing your son a folded flag. Quit beating yourself up like you're three years old again." She raised one hand to my face. She hadn't touched me there in four years. Almost immediately, she drew her hand back like she had touched a burner on a stove. "That little boy grew up. You may have been a shitty husband, but you're a great cop."

"How are the kids?" I said, changing the subject.

"Allan took them camping."

Allan, the new husband. Structural engineer who worked on the municipality's small fleet of river patrol boats checking out the bridges. A likeable guy, but I could never see past the fact that he had been screwing Samantha the entire last year of our marriage—usually when I was out busting Razor and his cousins. Still, he did all right by our kids. And he treated Samantha well.

At the very least, I knew nobody would put their hands on her like that Hewitt scumbag did to Claire.

She bit her lip and looked at me a long time. There was something on her mind, and it wasn't about Allan or the unconscious girl on the gurney.

"Tommy, you know I'm still listed as your next of kin, right?"

"Yeah," I said, vacantly. I reached down and took Claire Hewitt's right hand in mine, absently reading the alphanumeric data on her barcoded wristband, knowing and trying to drown out what Samantha was going to say.

"Doctor Tolliver called me into his office the other day. He asked if I wanted to see your chart. He tells me your lymph nodes are worse and you're refusing chemo. He says you're self-medicating."

"Sick leave doesn't come with overtime, Sammy Pants."

She hated it when I called her Sammy Pants.

"Fuck, Tommy, this isn't about the child support. Don't you wanna see your boy grow up and play college football? Don't you want to see your daughter's dance recitals? You're thirty-five fucking years old. You don't have the right to euthanize yourself! Or is this all a big act to try to garner sympathy from me?"

"Samantha, I'm a cop, and you just said I'm a good one. What fucking good will I do anyone in a wheelchair?"

"What good will you do anyone in a goddamned casket? At least drink plenty of fiber. The Percocet will constipate you. Don't mix it with Vicodin. Or whisky. Or Ambien. Fuck, Tommy Francis, take care of yourself, okay? I may not be in love with you anymore, but don't think that means I don't care about your sorry ass."

She left the room. I sat back down in the overstuffed chair and reached over to again hold Claire's limp hand in mine. At that moment, I felt incredibly sad for her. Part of the fight that

precipitated the events of the evening had been about the Hewitt house being in foreclosure. By the time Claire got out of the hospital, there would be an eviction notice on her door from the bank. And while she had been in the hospital fourteen hours, I was the only one being visited by friends and family.

The bruise on her face had started to darken, and I absently brushed back her hair from her forehead, whispering that nobody was going to hurt her ever again.

When she had awakened and was alert enough, she, her doctor, and I discussed where she was going to go. She knew the outline of the tentative plan but mostly stared off into space. Psych did an assessment and ruled she was not a danger to herself or others, though they gave her several Seroquel for sleep. Somewhere in that haze she had the wherewithal to lift a pen and sign herself into my custody.

Both the precinct department shrink and the on-duty hospital shrink took me aside and gave me the speech on trauma bonding, Stockholm syndrome, transference, white-knight syndrome, Florence Nightingale effect—pretty much everything that encompassed what Claire had been through and what, if we were in close proximity throughout her recovery, she might soon project on me. (I probably should have had a better ear.)

Before we could depart, we had to formally review the plan with her. Her doctor, Samantha, Marco, and I joined her in a room as she was wheeled in, staring off at the window. Next to Samantha was a thin redhead in a brown Prada power suit with cranberry checked pinstripes over a tan blouse with a bold, matching berry ascot around her throat.

The lady's corresponding cranberry-colored eyeglass frames made her look cutesy in a comic-book way—as if she were trying to pull off a female Clark Kent look. It was wholly apropos in this case; in my grandfather's eyes, she had been his little "Supergirl."

The power suit was our half sister, Francine Shira Goyevsky, sole daughter of our father, Frank Spenser, and graduate of Yale Law, certified by the Virginia, Maryland, Washington, DC, and Pennsylvania Bar Associations.

Although Francine's proper legal name was Spenser, she used the name Goyevsky, her late mother's name, on her American Bar Association card, especially within the city limits of Pittsburgh. Saying you were a Spenser that practiced law in this town was like saying you were part of the Mafia.

Francine clerked as an assistant district attorney for the City of Pittsburgh on the Victim Advocacy Task Force. I held off on informing Claire that Francine was related to us. Not necessarily a full-court-press deception, but between my ex-wife being her nurse practitioner and my adoptive brother/partner joining us, I didn't want her to feel completely strong-armed by my current or former family.

"Mrs. Hewitt," I began.

"Claire is fine."

"Claire, then. Claire, this is Attorney Goyevsky of the Victim Advocacy Task Force. She took your statement along with my partner when you were first conscious. We've called you in here to discuss the next steps with you. Your house . . ." Tears began to stream down her face as she continued gazing into the distance. "While you were in here, your house went into foreclosure status and the eviction fully processed. You cannot go back to your former residence, else you'll be considered trespassing by the Allegheny County Sheriff's Office. The family court judge has offered to sign you into my protective custody for an indefinite time, with your consent. This wouldn't be funded by the department, but my family . . ." I looked at Marco. ". . . *our* family has a place you could stay till you're on your feet. There's a couple apartments. I'd be right next door."

Claire responded by clicking the self-administering pump on her IV three times. “Just take me to the shelter.”

Francine leaned forward and pushed her glasses to the bridge of her nose. “Mrs. Hewitt, the domestic violence shelters have a nearly sixty-day backlog of overflow. Sergeant Spenser’s offer is the only thing anyone is offering you right now.”

Claire stared back out the window, tears still flowing freely. “My baby’s dead. Gone. I don’t care what happens to me.”

Samantha took charge. “Can the ladies have the room, please?”

Marco, the doctor, and I looked at one another, mixed confusion and trepidation on our faces, and quietly exited to wait in the hallway.

Fifteen minutes later, the door opened, and there was some light conversation and—to my surprise—a few smiles in the room. Samantha pulled me aside and passed me the clipboard with Claire’s signature and the liability waivers declaring that she was signing herself into my care.

“You should have led with the fact that we’re all related in some form. It put her mind at ease to know that someone’s looking out for her. But be careful, Tom. She’s a human being; she’s not a puppy that followed you home.”

“That’s fucking rich, Samantha. Lessons from you on how to be compassionate and have awareness and empathy. That’s some fucking Oprah Winfrey/Maury Povich—level irony.”

Her smiling expression immediately switched back to the oh-so-familiar anger and bitterness I usually stoked up in her disposition.

“You’re a real prick, Thomas Spenser.”

“And then some.”

CHAPTER 2

I signed Claire into my custody, as far as the hospital administration was concerned, and wheelchaired her out to my beat-up 1987 Ford Mustang, black with one red door. Samantha had gotten the Grand Cherokee in the divorce.

I wasn't a social worker, but I felt the girl was my responsibility, seeing as how I had let the bastard who assaulted her walk free. But Pittsburgh police had caught up fast with the no-so-gentlemanly Mr. Hewitt at Sharky's Bar in Carnegie. Although assault and battery wasn't our beat, Escardo called in a few favors with the detectives who usually worked the Homestead domestic battery beat, and when they put him in the interrogation box with Hewitt, I heard the motherfucker was crying like a schoolgirl.

Jake Hewitt, an otherwise law-abiding citizen, posted bail two days later and had a protection-from-abuse levied against him. By the time I tracked him to his brother's house in Greentree, good old Jake had decided to jump bail and get the hell out of Dodge. Having been recently unemployed and dumped by the local Greentree Millwrights Union, he drew the last of what was in his checking account. I gleaned from a few snitches as well as his internet search history that he had headed to Seattle to find work on a fishing trawler as a deckhand and mechanic.

I decided to let him go. Who gave a fuck about a piece-of-shit wife batterer jumping bail? It wouldn't bring back a dead baby or undo the damage to his wife. If he was freezing his ass off on a fishing boat and he wasn't beating on some poor girl in the Pacific Northwest, good riddance.

Part of me felt I should drop Claire at the nearest halfway house or find out where her relatives were and get her to them. Go home, fix a drink, catch up on the DVR, and close the book on Mrs. Clarissa "Call me Claire" Hewitt. But that part of me was

my dad and my brothers. I could hear the old man now, in all his hypocrisy as a lifelong card-carrying member of the order of abusive husbands: “Dumb broad should have gotten the hell out of there when the thumps first started coming.” But my brothers would have at least made sure the girl was somewhere safe. *That* part was passed down to us through our mother.



Retired deputy commissioner Frank Spenser never again laid a hand on my mother after the night I came back from Little League to find him passed out on the sofa with a bottle of scotch pooling at his feet. Brady was pitching a doubleheader the next day and working extra hours with the coach. My mom was in the kitchen, holding a bag of frozen vegetables against an eight-ball-size hematoma on the side of her face.

With the same Louisville slugger that I smashed into Razor’s whip twenty-seven years later, I busted my old man’s jaw and the orbital bone around one eye socket, broke four ribs, and whaled the bat against his leg, shattering his kneecap so badly he would walk with a limp the rest of his life. But he never drank again nor raised a hand to my mother, ever. The official story to the police was that I was still warming up with Brady at Little League practice when the “unknown assailant” attacked my dad. No mention was made in the police report of the condition of my mother’s face, nor were any charges ever pressed against the old man for what he did.

I don’t think it was the first-class ass whooping from his eight-year-old son that sobered him up; it was being taken off the street as a homicide investigator and relegated to a desk for the rest of his career.

For a long time after that, my brothers didn’t talk to me—out of shame, it seemed. Kenny was a bit older than us and already

out of the house, but it hit Brady hard. Brady and I are twins and had been looking out for each other since we were tots. Once, when I was five, I got between Mom and the old man and took a beating so bad that one eye swelled shut for a week. Brady was the smart one of the two of us; I was the one who thought with my fists. If it had been Brady who took out the old man that night, you could bet he would have had his getaway plan and alibi already laid out. And Frank Spenser would have been in the grave.



From the hospital, Claire and I headed to my apartment over the family gym.

Born Mikael Ivanov Rosencoff and affectionately known as Papa by me and my siblings and Mickey by everyone else, my maternal grandfather managed prizefighting boxers when there was still smog in the sky over Pittsburgh from the steel mills. He started out over in Churchill at an Italian gym, but when the owners started paying protection money to the local racketeers, my papa made a move of brass balls. He borrowed against the house and bakery he owned with his brothers to pay for the old Point Spring and Driveshaft warehouse on Melwood Street. Over several months, he paid Irish and Polish and Black demolition crews off the books and under the table to turn it into the gym he had envisioned.

When all the naysayers were talking shit that the bank was going to foreclose any minute, my papa held a pro tournament on opening night that covered feather through heavyweight divisions, dubbing it the Steel City championship. Open registration was fifty bucks a fighter, a pretty chunk of change (worth around \$800 in 2012) in 1941, so he attracted a lot of rich steel magnates who were sponsoring up-and-coming

fighters, and the bookies went nuts. In five hours, he made the monthly mortgage payment and cleared a thousand dollars after concessions, staff, and paying the fighters and referees. In five months of business, he'd paid off the building.

He turned that little strip of Pittsburgh into a boomtown, but he never forgot his roots. He kept the same modest little house he had always lived in with my nanna, not even two blocks from the gym, and when Alzheimer's and dementia took my nanna at eighty-seven, he lived the remaining eleven years of his life in the little set of bachelor apartments he had built above the gym for coaches, trainers, and visiting fighters. It was there I found him the morning of October 9, 2009, when he didn't answer the phone and the daily regulars couldn't figure out why the doors were still locked. He had the sheets pulled up to his chin as he always slept, and I wept like a baby when I saw the picture on his nightstand was of me, him, Kenny, and Brady the day Brady and I graduated Metro Police Academy.

I wasn't alone in my weeping. All the men and the handful of women he had coached over the years turned out in droves as my brothers and my mom and I sat shiva in the little efficiency; we eventually had to open the somber festivities to the entire gym to accommodate all the mourners. Primanti Bros, Papa's favorite Pittsburgh restaurant, donated two truckloads of catering for the wake. His procession of pallbearers was a who's who of boxing legends and Pittsburgh celebrities. His gloves from boxing in his late teens to his early thirties were bronzed in a showcase by the door, and there was an empty stool next to the judge's booth that his cane, now gilded, still rested against.

Papa had named the gym Mickey's, and after he died, we decided to leave the corporation's name intact, with one minor modification: since he had been more of a dad to us than our useless drunk of an old man, we commissioned the gym "Mickey & Sons" a year after his death. Each of the brothers was a

shareholder, and we bought out our mom and uncle for their shares.

When shit started to go south in my marriage with Samantha, I moved into Papa's apartment above the gym, leaving everything nearly as it was when he was alive. I wound up buying bunk beds for me and Thomas Junior and a crib for Allie; both kids were barely toddlers when their mom and I split. Kenny and Brady never mentioned it nor charged me a penny's rent.

"Your sister's nice," Claire said as we made the drive from UPMC. "Smart lady, smarter dresser. I knew who she was before the nurse said anything."

"How'd you know she was my sister?" I asked, a slight grin forming on my face.

"Because I'm not a complete idiot." She chuckled from under the bundle of blankets in the passenger seat. "Everyone was nice. Funny coincidence your ex works in that hospital."

"She doesn't always work that one. She's on rotation there sometimes."

There were three studio apartments above the training areas and fighting rings. One was mine, formerly Papa's. One was for guest fighters and coaches coming through for events, and one stored spare gear and promotional stuff. From the streets, the primary set of stairs and the hallway to the studio apartments that made up the roofline ran in an enclosed corridor exterior to the main part of the building that housed the gym, heavy bags, fight rings, and workout machines. The interior catwalk leading to the doorways that faced into the building and overlooked the inside of the gymnasium was originally meant for emergency fire exits.

A handful of regulars were wrapping up their workouts for the night, and I heard catcalls, unsolicited advice from the benches, gloves hitting canvas, guys talking shit to other guys, and a steady snap of jump ropes smacking against concrete. Nobody paid any

mind to me escorting my guest up to the loft, except for a few instances of “Hey, Coach Tommy” or “Hey, boss.”

As Mickey got older and weaker, we had installed an elevator lift at the end of the row of apartments to bring him up to the catwalk after he trained the fighters downstairs. Before he passed, we’d discussed remodeling and making the catwalk an actual observation balcony.

“Okay, here we are,” I said cheerfully, supporting her around the waist as we stepped slowly on the suspended platform to the set of studios and she steadied herself on the handrail. I fished in my pocket for the key to the apartment next to mine. It had a queen-size bed for the visiting guest fighter and two daybeds/couches in the living room for the trainer and cornerman. I intended this to be Claire’s place, but as I handed the key to her, she shook her head.

“Can I stay at your place?”

“Claire, I’m not sure that’s such a good idea.”

“Tom, I just . . .” She heaved a choked sob, leaning her head on my shoulder so I couldn’t see her eyes. “I just don’t want to be by myself right now.”

“Sure. My son and I have two beds over in this side, over here. I’ll just stay on the couch.”

“It’s your place. You tell me where you’re comfortable. Thank you. I just want to go back to sleep.”

So it was on TJ’s bunk bed that I temporarily set up Claire Hewitt while she was still lethargic and riddled with grief. The woman had lost enough inside of a week, and I’d be damned if I was going to say no to her.

My mother lived a few streets over and, though in her late sixties, was still sharp as a tack and kept the books for the gym as diligently as she had done for her father when she was nineteen. She hadn’t so much as raised an eyebrow when I walked past her office with the 100-pound bundle of battered housewife cradled

in my arms. She was used to moments of charity clouding judgment in the Rosencoff-Spenser boys, and I think it pleased her that we were so different from our father.

Still, after I tucked Claire in and made sure she was comfortable before venturing off to speak to my mom, I found myself looking down at my shoes the same way I had after I introduced my father to my Mickey Mantle–edition line drive.

My mom peered at me over her glasses, then went back to her ledger. “The mother of your children called. She told me we might be having a guest.”

“Did she now?”

“Is our guest on anything?”

Having been a cop’s wife and the mother of cops, my mom had plugged wounds, passed incriminating documents, ironed shirts, and made matzo ball soup for a variety of snitches, informants, loan sharks, debtors, thugs, conspirators, and corrupt politicians as well as a smattering of Dad’s drug-addled hookers who made up the unofficial intelligence network of the Pittsburgh criminal underground back in the day. Nothing would have surprised her. However, in the business her father had built, she had one golden rule, regardless of whether she was a silent partner or not: no using on the property. This went from the general anabolic athletic steroids favored by up-and-coming boxers to marijuana, meth, speed, cocaine, and everything else under the sun.

All of Papa Mickey’s fighters had been natural muscle; jump rope and sparring had built his legacy the last seventy years. Hardened dealers, even some of Razor’s crew, would run at the sight of little Mrs. Spenser swinging open the doors to Mickey’s gym with a shotgun bigger than she was, “sweeping away the riffraff from the porch,” as she called it. And they all abided. To give a cop’s family any sort of grief was a death knell, period. To fuck with a woman with three cop sons and an ex-husband who was a retired deputy commissioner . . . well, that was just suicide.

Razor and his boys kept their rivals away from Melwood Street and made sure their transactions happened across the bridge.

“She’s on some painkillers from the doc, but other than that, no; she’s just a beat-up young lady who needs a place to stay.”

Mom stood from her desk and put her glasses down. For the thousandth time, she reminded me of Golda Meir. Not in actual looks but in the dignified way she carried herself. Such a little lady, someone’s grandma you just wanted to scoop up and hug, but at the same time she exuded an air that she was not to be trifled with.

“And how’s my best boy?”

I laughed at that. She called all of us her best boys.

“Tamas—Tommy, your ex-wife tells me you are neglecting your appointments.”

“She talks too much. And I don’t earn from a hospital bed, Mama.”

“Fah! Money is not why you do it.”

“No, Mama? Then why do I do it?”

“You have a demon in you that you are trying to outrun. You think that part of you became your father the night you protected me from him. That’s why you live in that little apartment when your ex-wife lives in your house with her new husband. That’s why you take care of someone else’s wife whose husband is just as much of a bastard as your father was. That’s why you went Narcotics. You think you can save everyone. And you think if you can run fast enough, you can outrun death.”

“But you’re proud of me that I’m a narcotics cop.”

“I’d be proud of you if you were a garbage man.”

I smiled. “Goodnight, Mom.”

“I love you, Tommy. I’ve loved you ever since I first felt you kick.”

This started a straight-man routine she had been bouncing

off me and Brady since we were old enough to talk. “How’d you know it wasn’t Brady kicking?”

“You always kicked twice as hard.”

“Goodnight, Mom.”

“You’ll see the doctor tomorrow?”

“We’ll see. I love you, Mom.”

As I walked back toward the stairs leading up to what I considered my home, I was greeted by Charley, the official mascot of Mickey’s gym. Charley was an eight-year-old golden retriever we’d rescued as a puppy from the pound six or seven years after our grandmother died, as company for our grandfather. Charley had been Papa Mickey’s dog and ever since Mickey’s death made a habit of dividing his ownership between me and my mother and the grandkids and the fighters who trained at the gym.

Every evening since Papa’s death, he had camped out by the stool next to the judge’s box as the fighters sparred in the main ring, and when we shut off the lights to the gym, Charley would crane his head toward the door, waiting patiently for his late master until he heard the door bolt shut. At that sound, in resignation he would climb to the top of the steps to my apartment. We had welded a doggy door off the maintenance entrance for Charley years ago, and as far as he was concerned, he had the neatest doghouse in all of Pittsburgh.

I refilled Charley’s food and water and climbed up to my apartment. My guest was sitting up on the sofa and brightened a bit when I came in.

“Hi,” I said.

“Where exactly are we? I remember the hospital, and what we talked about, but not much else. I would have made some coffee, but I didn’t want to be a snoop.”

“No, it’s fine. I’ll make some,” I said. “We’re over near Schenley. My family owns this building: Mickey & Sons gym on

Melwood. You were in and out. I didn't know who to call. Your house is, um . . .”

“I know. All I remember was talking a little with the doctor and in your car. How long was I in the hospital?”

“You were in and out of consciousness for about four days.” I absently stared into space as the kettle boiled and then poured two steaming cups of water into some instant coffee grinds. I turned and handed her a mug. She giggled slightly—a welcome sound in that lonely apartment—when I grabbed a bottle of Hershey’s caramel syrup and squeezed a good amount into my cup. When I proffered it to her, she smiled and shook her head. “Just sugar is fine.”

I continued with my report on her stay at the hospital. “They were monitoring you for shock and, um, depression. You lost a lot of blood in the incident, you spiked a high fever, and they ran a lot of fluids through you. You didn’t eat much on your own; you actually lost seven pounds, which for such a low body weight to begin with isn’t good at all. Your ex—I mean, your husband’s family—wasn’t very agreeable, and, well, I couldn’t find anyone on your side nearby, so that was when I pitched to the doc, and you, to bring you here. Temporarily, of course. Until you get on your feet.”

She didn’t say anything, so I went on. “My mom keeps the books for this place; she might look in on you from time to time, but she’s just being nice. There are fighters in and out all day training, and we usually close up around nine thirty. No one will bother with you, but the door here has a break-in bar on it if you get spooked.” I pointed to a two-by-four piece of steel that spanned the width of the door and the hooks to hang it on, then gestured to a small suitcase of her things I had packed before the bank had gotten to the house. “I grabbed your purse and your cell phone too. I talked to the sheriff’s office and made a

few calls. Most of the things we could identify as yours are in a storage locker across town.”

I handed her the key. She managed a small smile and resignedly set it on the coffee table in front of her. “You seem like you’ve done this before.”

“I just did what I would want someone to do for me if I was in trouble.”

She placed her mug next to the keys, covering her face with her hands as the first sobs seized control of her body. She cried, more like wailed, for the better part of an hour. I didn’t try to comfort her or take her hand; I simply sat beside her, keeping a good two feet away on the couch. When her sobbing stopped and her breathing was shallow and steady, I covered her up with a blanket, went into the bedroom, and changed into sweats and sneakers.

I turned on the main light in the gym and started jumping rope and worked out on the bags while Charley watched, keeping his vigil next to the empty stool. When I came back upstairs, my guest had found her way back to the bunk beds. I stood under the jet spray of the shower for a good twenty minutes, then slipped on another pair of sweatpants for modesty’s sake. Grabbing a pillow off Thomas Junior’s empty bunk, I headed for the couch and quietly shut the door. I did not jump in shock at the fact that my partner was sitting at the kitchen counter.

Marco had his own set of keys to the gym and was probably wondering where the fuck his partner and supervisor had been hiding for four days. Being a dependable partner, he had already found the Johnnie Walker Black Label and two jelly glasses. He had his jacket off and looked like a 1930s bartender. In addition to the affectation of his little Beretta backup, he also wore classic “cotton club” shirtsleeve cuffs, the kind that went around your upper arm. I didn’t know where the fuck you even got those these

days. He looked like he was going for a Latino Paul Newman à la *The Sting*.

“My sergeant is not widely known for being Santa Claus. Nor for bringing his work home with him.”

“I’m coming back tomorrow. I called in with the captain.”

“Are you kidding? He nearly threw a party. You haven’t taken vacation time in months. Did you hear Razor is gonna walk on the drugs and his lawyer’s gonna post bail on brandishing of a firearm and illegal ownership of a pistol while a felon? He’ll probably knock the firearms charge off the sheet due to illegal entry because we had no probable cause to enter the property.”

“Since when is a tipline not probable cause?”

“Because we didn’t have line of sight or witnesses on any goings-on at the house. The car, yes. But once we set foot from the street to the house property line, defense is calling us cowboys.”

“Prints on the bag?”

“Nope. Nor on the gel caps or vials. No prints on the cash, so we seized that. We tried to raise the bail amount on the weapons charge. That fucking defense lawyer of his did a tap dance and a half. Threw a fit about police brutality. IAD wants to talk to you, but as far as they’re concerned, everything we did was textbook.”

“What do you mean ‘we,’ Kemosabe? I’m not the hot-tempered spic that tasered a suspect,” I said.

“Eat my greasy taco shits, you Mick Jew-boy.” We clinked glasses. He downed his drink and stared levelly at me. “Boss, what the hell are you doing with the assault victim in your bed?”

“Sometimes people just need help, Marco.”

“It’s not on us to get her *that* kind of help. We just make sure people walk the line and stay out of trouble.”

“To protect and serve, my friend. What if it was someone beating on Inez like that?” I asked.

My partner’s eyes turned to stone. “The motherfucker couldn’t be identified by his teeth when I was through with him.

But the woman in the other room's not your wife, Tommy."

"Neither are you, you little Tex-Mex shitbird, but I look out for your sorry ass." We both laughed.

■ ■ ■

The next morning, I went into general holding at the Allegheny jail. I surrendered my gold shield, my belt, tie, and my service department Glock 9 with my Intratec TEC-38 backup to the guard desk. What Samantha affectionately referred to as my "cowboy cock" .45 was an affectation, a near duplicate of the Army sidearm I had carried in Bosnia, but I usually kept it locked up if I wasn't expecting trouble. It was currently unloaded, fieldstripped, and disassembled on my kitchen counter, waiting to be oiled.

After the weapons and explosive-residue detector scored no hits and issued no beeps, I strolled through to pretrial confinement. My suspect was already in the interview room, much more alert than the last time I'd seen him. He was in an orange jumpsuit as a formality, but he and I both knew he had already been processed; his lawyer's office was just registering the paperwork and accompanying the county clerk.

I wanted ten minutes to fuck with him. To add a bit of flair to the moment, I even wore my yarmulke. Razor didn't seem to notice the clear, surgical, latex gloves over my hands.

"The Irish rabbi's little kike son. Detective Tommy. What brings you to my palace on the river?"

"Hello, Razor. I came to talk."

"Y'all heard they let me off on the drugs and I'm gonna walk out this door soon?"

"Oh yeah."

"So technically youse is violating my civil rights. This harassment."

"It could be. It could also be just two men talking."

“I’m listening, Officer Tommy.”

“You were set up. Who hates you enough to do this? I’ve been tracking you so long that I know in my gut you’re too much of a professional to keep your stash in plain view. That’s methhead-tweaker levels of error. You have lieutenants and street soldiers for distribution. And why would cash and product be in the same spot?”

“Two men talking. Hypotheticals?”

“Completely off the record. I don’t even have a pen on me.”

“So, a friend of mine, in the same line of business, would say—this is a friend, mind you—it could be one of two things. It’s a setup for a hit on me. Death by cop. They expect me to react same way I did. Or . . . *or* it’s a setup on *you*, Mr. Tommy. One user of product to another. Course, I just dip my hands in the jar from time to time. I don’t ride the dragon of death like you do. Took a few bullets back in ’99 and just used that as an excuse to try every drug under the sun, didn’t you? And here you are, Tommy. Narcotics. Talk about a fucking hypocrite! I hear, though, you’ve weaned off of heroin these days, just sticking to pills. Tragedy, really.”

I felt a shudder down my neck, and my skin burned behind my ears. I grasped the underside of the steel table welded to the floor because at that moment I felt I just might fall off the earth.

“Shit, Tommy. I never thought a White man could get whiter, but yo’ ass just did, nigga.”

I looked over at the two-way mirror. The light was on, exposing the chamber and showing that nobody was watching us.

Razor started rattling off in reverse chronology. “August 2012, Percocet, two bottles, Old White Tower Diner. July 2012, six fentanyl patches, Allegheny Center Mall. June 2012, three bottles of Tramadol, an IV bag of morphine, and an IV infusion kit. May 2012, no activity; all the brothers thought you were shot again because you were an alternate on the SWAT team roster, maybe chasing an adrenaline-junkie rush, but your cell phone

ping ended up putting you out at Harmarville Rehabilitation Clinic. Fuck, that didn't work out too well, I guess. Otherwise, you score Oxy from the street hookers you use for snitches. I hope at least you double-bag your pecker."

His street drawl was gone now, and I could have been talking to an Ivy League law club chairman or a litigator with twenty years' experience. I closed my eyes, and instead of the staleness and antiseptic of the Allegheny jail, I imagined the mahogany and cigars of Pittsburgh's Harvard club—rich leather seats, the way the hubbed-spine books' pages felt like bond certificates in your hands. Razor in a three-piece Tom James suit instead of prison overalls. I went to this place in my head because it was all that kept me from throwing up in a panic attack, allowing Razor to look down on me even more.

"But I hear now you got another addiction, a little pet project: little Irish redhead from Homestead that her man uses as a punching bag—"

BANG. I grabbed a good length of his dreadlocks and smashed his nose into the steel table. I reached into his mouth while he was still dazed, jammed two fingers in—both to gag him so his tongue would come forward as well as to prevent his jaw from coming down to bite—and pulled at the threads of his stitches. Brown scabs and blueish-red blood came drooling out, an early Jackson Pollock abstract spray on the silver steel square of the visitor's slab.

He was about to scream for the guards but then squinted up at me and chuckled. After spitting, gagging some more, and wiping the messy substance on the long sleeves of the white, thermal underwear he wore under his prison orange scrubs, he swallowed back the rest of the blood, even though it looked like it was making him ill. After a few more gulps and sucking on his teeth a bit, he finally spoke.

"So, you see where Internal Affairs might have created a

scenario to observe if you'd take the bait dangled in front of you. Guess it's a good thing your brother lets his twin be a junkie. And that leads us back to me. Someone's trying to take me out. So go and be a fuckin' *cop* . . . and find out who."

I stood and gathered myself, smoothing out my jacket, then studied the steady mess of Razor. He looked like a *Walking Dead* zombie, a bib of bright-red blood making an upside-down sunrise on his prison jumper. I reached into my sportscoat and tossed him a clean handkerchief, like offering a Band-Aid for a sucking chest wound.

"If you want to stay here a little longer and have the medics re-stitch you, then you're welcome to say it was me. I could use the paid leave. However, that's probably a tumble-fuck of paperwork, investigators coming in and talking to you, and likely another two or three days here in holding. If you want to get the fuck back home, you would be wise to say you're a heavy bleeder and you slipped, and head back over to UPMC Mercy. I'll let Dr. Kerrick know to expect you."

"Will do."

"Oh, and, Razor?"

"What is it, Detective?"

"Next time you roll up heavy on me, you'd better shoot—and not miss." I was out for blood. I wasn't thinking straight.

"Bitch, you'll never even see it when I take you down."



I had Claire spend the night at my mother's under the pretense of a warm, home-cooked meal, good conversation, and the appeal of sleeping in a bed that wasn't dimensionally designated for children. She was only too happy, and slipped out the door with eagerness and a smile, squeezing my hand and looking into my eyes with—what was it?

Those eyes were doing a number on me. My fingers held hers slightly longer than the invisible decorum between us dictated, and a wan, awkward, patronizing smile appeared at the edges of her mouth before the door shut, the kind you wear when you're dealing with shitfaced uncles who piss themselves in the middle of the dance floor at your sister's wedding.

I sent Charley home with Respottek, our lead coach and trainer, for the night. Repo was practically another brother to us, having grown up with Kenny as one of Mickey's boxers in the '70s and '80s. He had been a Navy master at arms (their version of military police) and later a Homeland Customs and Border Protection officer who coached practically for free in his double federal retirement. Charley sometimes bunked with Repo if I had work that took me out of town. Repo didn't raise an eyebrow or ask any questions. I wanted the gym to myself for what I was about to do.

I sent a text to Marco, and waited.


At 10:55 p.m., the door to my apartment opened. I had intentionally thrown off the breakers to my apartment only, while the rest of the building remained lit. I heard a bit of cursing in Spanish and the distinctive thud of both the pocket .22 and Marco's M45 SOC pistol. I knew his next step would be to try to use his cell phone as a flashlight. As soon as he began to rustle in his pockets, I nailed him full force, a linebacker hitting a tackle dummy.


"Sarge! Tommy, what the—"

I had one hand around his throat. The other had my Intratec .38 pointed in the center of his head. "Did you rat me out to Internal Affairs, you rat motherfucker?!"

"What the fuck are you talking about?"

"Two weeks ago you had four days off! Then all a fucking sudden we find a drop vehicle with a bag full of drugs and cash! Setting up Razor to look like the biggest goddamned mongoloid

in the history of drug dealers that breathed air or setting me up to look like the biggest mutt that ever was because my own fucking partner is trying to rat me out to the fucking *state police*!” I had both hands around his throat. I was pure rage. 

He brought his knee straight up into my ball  and a starburst exploded across my eyes. All the air went out of my lungs. I dropped the .38 and writhed in agony until I caught my breath again. His hand struggled upward and closed on the counter. I heard him cock the SOC pistol, and he fired a warning shot out the kitchen window, shattering the glass. Thankfully, there was nothing but a vacant lot across from our property. He had kicked my .38 away under the couch and out of reach. Dogs started barking nearby. Fucking whole window was gone. I stood up, about to rush him again, and saw the red-dot laser in the center of my chest.

“You fuck around anymore, Tommy, and the next shot is in your pants. I will have Kenny and a SWAT team haul your ass away in cuffs.”

“Aww, poor widdle foster kid gonna run to big bwudder because Tommy knocked him on his ass—again. Not much has changed since you were a kid pissing in your pants, running to Rose when Brady and I caught you going through our shit whenever we were home from college.”

“Tommy, I fucking swear to God, the next one’s in your knee, or your *prick*, if you don’t calm down. Are you snorting Oxy again?”

“Where the fuck were you the other day then?”

“The fucking Cumberland Wellness Clinic!”

“What the fuck is that?”

He was red with embarrassment, and angry, frustrated tears built up in the corners of his eyes. “It’s a fucking in-vitro fertilization facility in central Pennsylvania. PD won’t sponsor IVF, so we had to use Inez’s health plan. Her HMO is specific,

and we had to go to that clinic first because it's tied to her corporate headquarters. That's where we fucking were for four days. Here." He reached into his jacket for a flyer. "That's all the info. We're trying to have a baby. We made a . . . a fucking mini second honeymoon out of it and stayed at a resort hotel by Penn State because she had daily fucking appointments! Turn the goddamn power on in here and quit beating my ass, and we'll put our fucking guns away and talk."

I went downstairs and threw the breaker to my apartment back on. Marco had used his phone to find the kettle and two mugs and got the coffee going. He dutifully poured a few fingers of rum in each mug once the kettle whistled. Having recovered my gun from under the couch, he emptied out the .38's bullets, spun the cylinder cowboy style, snapped it back shut, and handed the empty pistol back to me.

At that point, the buzzer to the door of the gym sounded. I looked at the security monitor mounted next to the TV above the breakfast bar. A Pittsburgh PD black-and-white with lights flashing, but no siren, sat idling at the front entrance.

I gave Marco the *shh* sign and went downstairs, my gold shield in my back pocket.

I opened the door. Patrolman Suzcyk. Hadn't seen him around before. Probably worked the Fifth Avenue beat. Maybe headed home when he got the call.

"Good evening, Officer."

"Good evening, sir."

I gently held my arm out to show him that I was not a threat or acting out of malice and turned my hip to indicate I was reaching into my back pocket. After a slight, curious nod from Columbo, I produced my credentials. "Sergeant Spenser, Counter-Narcotics Unit. My family owns this building."

His demeanor changed from that of John Q. Law to a puzzled footman. He wasn't quite sure what to do at this point.

“Sergeant, we had reports tonight of what sounded like, ahh . . . sounded like a gunshot?”

“Yeah, come with me.” I walked him around the side of the building and pointed up at the now empty kitchen window, a few shards of glass still hanging in the frame. Some bits crunched under our shoes where we stood. I assessed the trajectory and estimated the bullet had gone over the vacant lot and embedded in the hillside beyond. Past the hillside was the rest of the city, and I mumbled a silent thanks to God that Marco’s bullet hadn’t found an errant path to a kid’s bedroom, reminding myself to truly kick his ass sometime later.

“Fuckin’ women, right? Can’t live with ’em. Well, anyway, my girlfriend’s over earlier tonight, makes me a five-course dinner. Beautiful. Chicken à la king, pasta, garlic bread, soup, nuts, crème brûlée. I’m gonna get fat again just talking about it. Anyway, she *forgets* to turn off the goddamned *gas*. Fortunately, the doors were shut to the other rooms. Couple hours after she leaves, I step in and light a cigar. *BOOM!* Fuckin’ fireball blows out the window, knocks me on my ass, my head hits the corner of the coffee table, that’s where I got this fuckin’ shiner, and burns off all the fuckin’ wallpaper. My buddy and I are inventorying the damage now so I can call the insurance guys in the morning. You need to come up and have a look?”

“Um, no. That’s okay, sir. Who, ah . . . Ya said there’s someone else who’s up there with you?”

“Oh, my partner, Detective Constable Marco Escardo. Need me to have him come down?”

“Maybe just have him wave from the window.”

“Eeyo, *Marco!* How’s it looking with the insurance tally? We gonna be able to salvage anything?”

I could hear him trying not to laugh.

“Well, *buddy*, I think your mom’s crystal collection is blown to shit, but other than that, the worst damage was to the stove!”

Officer Suzcyk mumbled our names into his radio back to Central and reported there was no need for fire services to be called at that time, then wished us both a good night.

I went back up the catwalk to my partner, exceedingly sorry I had doubted him, and we proceeded to tie an epic alcoholic binge on for the rest of the evening, which may have involved whooping, hollering, several rounds on the heavy bag in the gym, and I think we may have even put on the gloves and gone a few rounds with one another.

Regardless, what started out as an evening of thinking my partner had screwed me over ended as most nights in the Spenser family ended—with combat, alcohol, beatings and brotherhood, tears and laughter. To an outsider it would seem like violence and pure dysfunction. To us, it was comfort, normalcy, and love. Most times I couldn't tell this person who was my partner and kid brother all in one that I loved him without being totally wasted. The Spenser boys never, ever said they loved each other. We barely said it to our wives. We awkwardly said it to our children. Between the brothers, we spoke our love in analogies. From the moment we first played cops and robbers to after we got our shields, it was all tied to being policemen. You couldn't say the word *cop* in our family without a reference to love. Those two words were one and the same in the Spenser dictionary. It was just our way.

I wish I had told Marco I loved him more during the times when I was dry and sober. I wish he'd known how much I loved him, how much of a real brother—blood or not—he'd been, and how truly special he was to me. I wish we'd had more nights left to us like that one.