

DEVOUR

Prologue

Michael whimpered in the dark, his shifting voice sputtered half-cries as he tried to man up. That was something his father had always told him. *Man up now, or you never will*, the voice echoed in his head. Touching his cheek, he could feel it had already begun to swell—the heat under the skin simmered like the hatred in his heart. He caught himself breathing much too heavily, because he was getting lightheaded much too quickly.

What have I done so wrong—

CRASH!

On the other side of the door, another dish shatters into pieces—followed by another terrifying scream. His mother sounded as though she were being beaten within an inch of her life. Because she likely was.

A warm trickle with the taste of copper crept into his mouth. He wiped his nose with the sleeve of his shirt and instinctively looked down, expecting to see bright red. But that was impossible because there were no lights in the tiny space. Nothing but woolen coats that smelled of tobacco and moth balls, boots soaked with the fragrance of earth, spent rags with the smell of grease, and slickers that stuck to his back because of rising heat in the confined space.

THUD!

Mom? Did he knock you down?

His heart began to race, and with the worse he could imagine, he began to panic. Instantly, that panic bubbled into rage, and without a care of what happened next, his fury exploded into a scream. It was a blood-curdling scream that rose from the bottom of who he was—as if suppressed for years. Because it had been. And he was tired of it. His eyes were squeezed shut so tightly, he imagined seeing light behind his lids, as he continued screaming.

“Shut the hell up in there, or I’ll give you something to yell about!”

But Michael didn’t stop screaming.

Instead, he ignored the pulsating pain in his ribcage, sucked in the biggest breath possible, and released a scream so horrifying he frightened himself. His head shook, his shoulders tightened, and the back of his throat felt like it was being scraped by a knife.

Suddenly, the door whipped open. The motion was so swift and powerful the clothes hanging above his head flew in the direction of the escaping door. Wire hangers spun on the wooden bar above his head, before crashing to the floor. The light temporarily blinded him, as he imagined an incoming fury that would certainly put a stop to his screaming.

But it didn't. And he wouldn't.

In fact, his screaming continued as though it were the last noise he would make—a noise the neighbors would never forget. Aware of more punishment to come, he instinctively raised his left arm to guard his face a split second before a crashing blow connected with his arm.

SNAP, like a dead tree limb.

The pain was unimaginable. Even with eyes wide open, he couldn't see a thing. The crushing force told his body to shut down, kicking into protection mode. A breathy *gasp* filled the air for a fraction of a second, followed by a strange silence. Then he fell backwards—his head hitting the back wall, before he crumbled onto the floor and into a sobbing heap.

“Now, maybe you'll shut the hell up!”

When the door slammed shut, it took several seconds before Michael sensed his throbbing arm. Catching his breath, he couldn't feel it. Reaching for it with his other hand, his fingers and palm felt lifeless. Sliding his hand down the arm toward his hand, a finger caught on something sharp and wet, and protruding from the skin. He felt his last meal bubble in his throat. Slumping forward, he desperately wanted to *man up*.

But he couldn't. And he didn't.

Instead, tears began to drip into his lap, just as the front door swung open, slamming the wall behind it and bringing a mirror crashing to the floor.

Next came his mother's screaming voice, “You hateful bastard!”

That was followed by a gunshot, *BANG!*

A scuffle, a scream, and another gunshot, *BANG!*

Suddenly, someone fell to the floor and slammed against the door he faced, as a thin scream pierced the momentary silence.

With no more strength, Michael gently laid his face against the cool wooden floor. In the gap at the bottom of the door, a pool of blood began to ooze toward his peeking eye.

He didn't know who was shot, who did the shooting, or who was dead—as his vision faded to black.

Chapter One

Thirty years later—

The rhythmic hum of tires on a metal bridge was working hard to lull Michael to sleep. Between the sparse traffic, the soft buzz from a post-work cocktail, and twelve straight hours of being on his feet, Michael's body was weary and his mind, frazzled. Looking to the horizon on his left, there was nothing but blackness. To his right, city lights created a fragmented sparkle on the glass thanks to a light drizzle. In minutes, he would pass through Sausalito, cross a slice of Richardson Bay, and weave his way through several townships, before landing home.

He pulled up to the house, but left the car in the driveway rather than entering the garage, in order to keep the house as quiet as possible. Once inside, he slid off his shoes and padded to the bar where a second drink would work to remove the madness of the day. Sinking into an oversized sofa, the twenty-year old scotch became the instant recipe to relax his exhausted body and quiet his troubled mind, while he stared out at his favorite vista. His last conscious image was the same which haunted him most every night: a tiny dark space of enormous blinding pain.

What felt like seconds later, was a loud crash which suddenly jarred Michael awake. Sitting up, it took a moment before he realized it was a truck outside. *Trash day*, he thought, blocking his eyes from the morning light, and stretching his stiff body. *And another night on the couch*, he frowned, falling back into the sofa. His mouth was dry, his head ached, and his throbbing hand found no relief. He was about to drift back off, when his watch pulsed, and a bleary eye read 5:55. Slowly making his way down the hall, he anticipated the one thing that could even hope to launch his day: a hot shower.

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Early morning fog drifted in slow motion over the hills of the Banana Belt atop the Marin Headlands. It floated toward the red strands of steel supporting the iconic Golden Gate Bridge, and slowly evaporated as it fell into the cold water below. Boats of all sizes and shapes moved eagerly about; some, left for the open Pacific, while others returned to their *City by the Bay*. Atop

the hills of neighboring Tiburon— a town north of the city and east of the bridge, a chilly breeze blew through open windows, as early morning sun tried to warm the hillside. Every morning— come fog or come sun, the remarkable beauty cast a spell on the Rogan’s home and their waking community.

This Monday was no different.

Pancetta and garlic sizzled in a buttered saucepan, while Michael hovered over the Wolf range that grounded the island in the middle of the great room. His prized *Henckel* knife deftly sliced through heirloom tomatoes and shiitake mushrooms, as daughter Natalie entered the room wearing workout wear and an ever-present smile. Kissing his cheek, her bright blue eyes sparkled in the early morning light.

“Morning, Daddy.”

“Morning, Angel,” he replied, slapping a high-five, as she took a seat atop the barstool across from him.

“Easy on the garlic, Pops,” she said playfully. “Don’t wanna scare the boys away.” Thumbing to the women’s sports section, she peeked over the *San Francisco Chronicle*. “But feel free to add all the goat cheese your heart desires.”

“Anything for my little girl,” he said over his shoulder, adding extra cheese and a light sprinkling of herbs to the scrambled eggs.

“Uh, young *woman*?” she said from behind the paper.

“Yes, of course.”

Turning to the sink, he took several pills from his pocket and washed them down with a glass of water. He didn’t as much hide the pill-popping, as much as he didn’t tried not to make a deal about it.

Next, he topped off the morning ritual by stuffing a handful of veggies into the *Vitamix* blender. He knew she would order a second breakfast on their way into the city, but it didn’t matter. This part of the day was a favorite, and he loved spoiling his only child. Besides, she trained in basketball *and* volleyball, consuming as much food as most boys her age. And standing nearly six feet tall—at just shy of seventeen, she was a force to be reckoned with.

“Daddy?” she shouted over the loud blender.

Michael held up a finger and mouthed, "Just a second."

Less than a minute, and a dozen decibels later, the blender stopped. Testing a sip, he nodded before passing it over the counter. "Yes, Nattie?"

"Pain bad today?" She sipped, flashing a thumbs-up.

His expression gave him away. Reaching across the counter to wipe her green mustache, he said, "You know how it goes. Same old damp chill."

"Uh huh. Thus the pills," she smirked, folding and setting aside the paper.

Spreading out a linen placemat, he wiped a small drip from the edge of the plate, then positioned it in front of her. "Just a little something to get *ahead* of it."

"Just keeping an eye on you," she said, digging in with reckless abandon. "I mean let's face it," she added, mid-mouthful, "Before long, who'll be around to mother you."

He frowned a smirk, nodding his coffee toward her.

"Thanks, but I'll get some later." she shrugged, sliding her finger across the plate to capture the last bit of soft cheese. "And I'm joking. Kinda."

"That's a new record," he grinned at the empty plate. "When's the last time you ate?"

Tilting her head, she squeezed a dimple deep into her cheek. "Really?"

Taking her things to the sink, he asked over his shoulder, "Want a juice to go?"

"What do you think," they said simultaneously—as only two connected-at-the-hip could.

Standing at the broad expanse of windows, she stretched her long limbs and took in the 270-degree view. "Never get tired of seeing that bridge."

"Ditto."

The front yard was in the middle of renovations; torn up in preparation for a new pool. She shook her head, recalling the long arguments back and forth about what they were going to do and what made the best sense.

"Pops, you sure you still want—"

"For the last time, *yes*," he interrupted. "It'll be perfect for burning stress after work. Plus, think of how it would help your training."

“Okay, okay,” she said, holding up both hands. “Just remember, training’s not going to last much longer.”

Natalie would turn 17 by mid-summer—just about the time she graduated high school. She was a stellar student, and a year ahead of most classmates her age. Early on, Michael saw her exceptional abilities to learn and absorb at twice the speed of those around her. He had wanted her to get an early start, because it was apparent she would advance more rapidly than most. And she did, time and again—not only in her studies, but any sports she focused upon. Basketball and Volleyball became her favorites and the ones in which she rapidly excelled. Now, in less than a year, Michael and his wife would be empty nesters—at much too early of an age. She continued to eyeball the space which had long been debated as to which would be a better choice: a swimming pool with jacuzzi, or a volleyball court with sand. A pool had won, and would be finished before long.

“Maybe you and Mom would rather—”

“Would rather what,” Kathryn said, entering the room—her long silk robe floating behind her as she padded barefoot across the room, stopping to kiss her daughter’s cheek. “What are you two conspiring against me now,” she grinned.

“Talking about the volleyball court Dad said he wanted to...” she trailed off, looking to him for support.

Grinning, he shook his head, “Pool. *And* jacuzzi. Just think how nice it’ll be when you come home to a relaxing swim before dinner.”

“Or a hot soak before bedtime,” Kathryn added.

Natalie smiled, knowing it was what they both wanted and deserved. Besides, between the courts at school, and either the indoor court at North Beach, or the outdoor court at Mission Bay, she had more than enough opportunities to practice.

“You’re right,” she said, raising her arms in surrender.

“I knew you’d see it our way,” he winked.

“Hey, what if we put a volleyball net *inside* the pool?”

Michael and Kathryn laughed. “Now, that’s a good compromise,” she said, approaching Michael. Putting together both palms, she bowed. “May I *please* have some of your world famous French roast, Mr. Barista?”

“What’ll you trade for it?” he grinned.

She opened her robe. “Perhaps this would be of interest?”

“Mom!” Natalie shouted, rolling her eyes before leaving the room.

Pouring a cup, he nodded toward her robe. “Nice trade.”

She gave a cordial smile, as Natalie shouted from down the hall, “Pops, I’ll be ready in 5. You best hustle!”

They both shrugged.

Kathryn Grace was her given name, but when her modeling career took off two decades ago, photographers gave her the nickname, Katie G. And it stuck. Many years and one child later, she rarely modeled, preferring commercials and occasional guest appearances on New York soaps, instead. However, with films roles being offered lately, she spent more time commuting between San Francisco and Los Angeles—a much easier jaunt than to NYC.

Michael watched her sipping coffee in her favorite chaise by the window, and thought she was as beautiful as the day they met over twenty years ago. Even though they spent more time apart from one another these days, and had hit their share of bumps along the way, he felt still close to her. Whether she felt the same was anyone’s guess. His mind flashed back to their early days and how after a short stint in the army, they spent their early years hustling their respective dreams in Manhattan. He bartended in Midtown taverns by day, juggling apprentice work in Upper East Side restaurants by night, while she modeled all over town both day and night, juggling occasional acting gigs *way off* Broadway. It was all about the hustle.

“You okay?” Michael asked.

“Huh? Yeah,” she said, snapping back to the present. “Just tired. Been a helluva week. Between that gig in New York and the shoot at the Apple campus yesterday...” she yawned and stretched. “Let’s just say the old gray mare ain’t what she used to be.”

He crossed the room and kissed her forehead. "First of all, babe, you're no gray mare. Secondly, why don't you slow down? And relax more? Reservations are a mile long and a month out. The restaurant's doing well."

She looked away, quiet.

"What?"

She faked a smile. "Nothing."

"Babe," he squatted down to look her in the eyes, "I know *that* nothing meant something. What's bothering you?"

She sighed, "You were in really late last night. Later than most."

"Not really. They're all late these days. Grueling is more like it."

Nothing.

Taking a sip, she glanced out the window. "Sorry. I know it's your passion. It's just that..."

"Just what," he asked, looking down the hall for Natalie.

"Let's get away. Soon. Just you and me."

"When you get back from your trip," he smiled. "Promise."

"Right," she tried another smile. "Like you promised Natalie you'd see her play basketball. In middle school. Then in high school. But were too busy. Then volleyball, in high school. An again..."

Frowning, he stood. She pulled his sleeve for him to face her.

"Babe, you know this is my life and—"

"That's just it. *Cooking* is your life. Not Natalie. Not me."

"Wait, that's not fair."

"You're right. It isn't. For any of us. And who..." she paused, then shook her head.

"What? Go ahead and finish," he sighed, looking down the hall again.

"No, you've got to get ready."

"I am. What is it?"

“How many years did you miss seeing her play?” She held up a hand to stop him before he could answer. “I’ll tell you. None. No, you went to *one*. Well, to be fair, you went once when she was very young, then once when it was clear she was going to be an elite athlete.”

“Hon, I’m sorry. It’s just...mine is *more* than a full-time job. This is what it takes to be the best.”

Now her smile seemed nearly authentic. “I know, babe. And you’re right. I don’t mean to jam you up the first day of a new week—especially with your...*our* girl facing such a momentous time. Sorry.”

“No, you’re right. On some of it. And no need to be sorry. I should be sorry. I’ll do better.”

“Right,” she nodded, taking his left hand. It was cold. She turned it over and frowned, running a fingertip along a scar which ran from the heel of his palm to the crook of his arm. It was barely apparent—thanks to a full sleeve of tattoos. The deep scar had been artfully crafted into the spine of a dragon, and the tip of the tail ended at his palm. It was intricate and multi-colored—the perfect camouflage.

“How’s it feeling today?”

Gently pulling away, he turned his attention to the clouds which were being split open with streaks of sun. “Pretty much SOP. Cold, numb and with a mind of its own,” he said, crossing the room for his car keys. “But it still works, and no one’s the wiser. Right?”

“Right,” she forced a smile, as Natalie came bounding into the room.

“Okay, my happy family, let’s get on down the road.”

After a flurry of kisses and high-fives, Dad and Daughter were out the door and off to the city.